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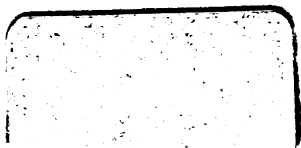
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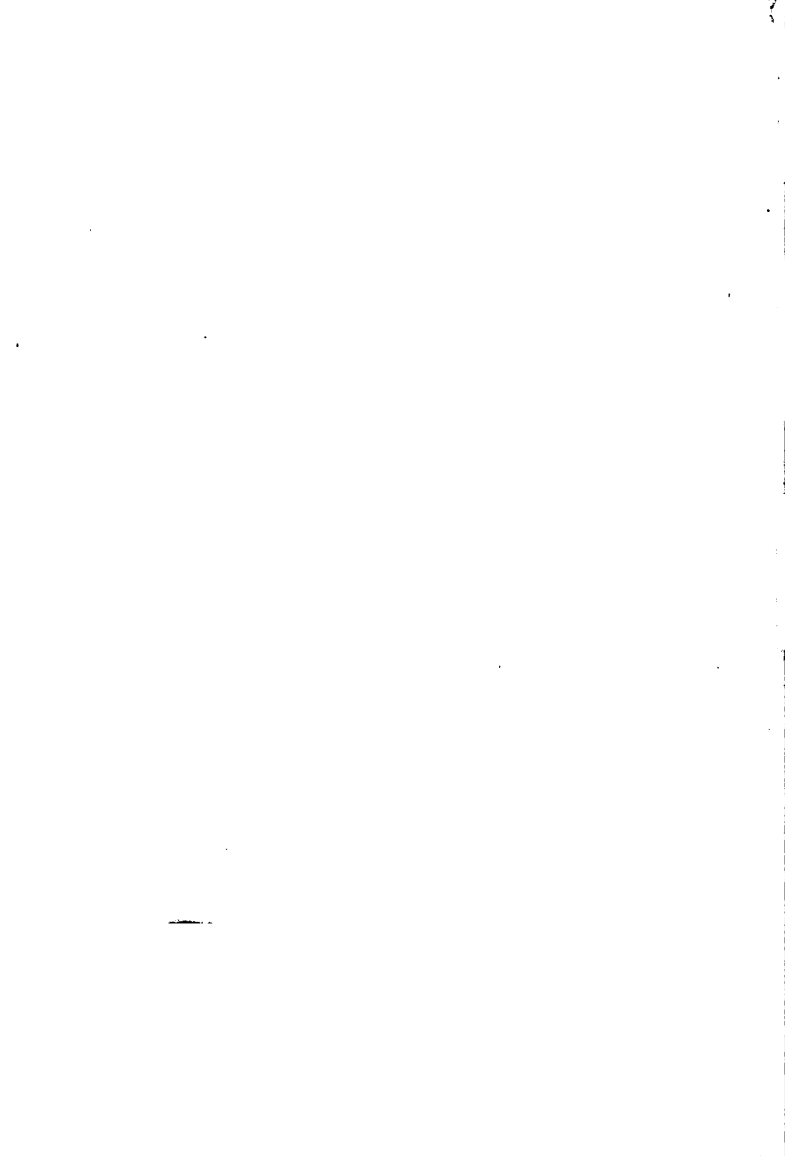


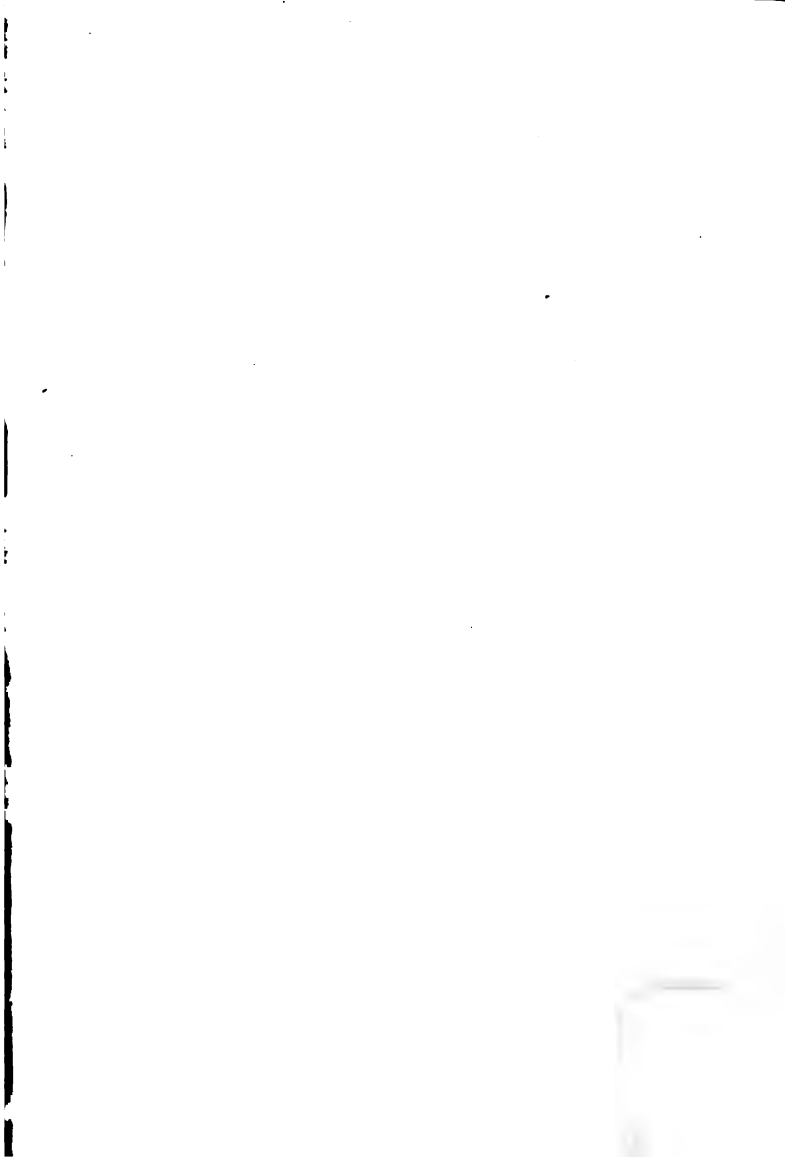
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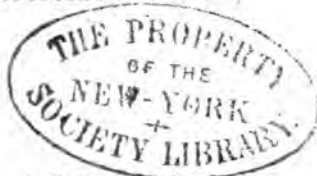
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BY

HAMILTON AÏDÉ,

AUTHOR OF "RITA," "IN THAT STATE OF LIFE," ETC.

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GEOFFREY LUTTRELL'S NARRATIVE.



GEOFFREY LUTTRELL'S NARRATIVE.

CHAPTER I.

A FEW weeks since we followed to his last resting-place in Kensal-green our old friend Geoffrey Luttrell. There were but four of us: but four persons in the world, I believe, who knew his real worth, and heartily felt the dear old fellow's loss. Of these, three were brother artists, the fourth was the landlady of the lodging between Notting-hill and Shepherd's-bush, which Luttrell had inhabited for upwards of thirty years. It had stood on the edge of green fields when he went to live there; it is now almost choked up with pert little streets, and very small pretentious villas. But he would not abandon it, perhaps for old habit's sake, perhaps for the yet worthier sake of Mrs. Brace. She was a good, warm-hearted woman, and an observant. She had waited on him all these years, and knew more of the recluse's ways than any of us. His shyness with his fellow-men, and his passionate love of nature—a love which bore him fruits in the tender, faithful work, which, with the faltering hand of upwards of three-score years, he yet produced—his pure-mindedness, his unfailing charity and sympathy with all suffering, these features in our friend's character were well known to us, who saw him as often as the busy wheel of London life would allow. But who could tell the daily

round of his silent, solitary hours like Mrs. Brace? In a long talk we had together, that dreary November afternoon in the sad little parlour, where we all sat after I had read our friend's brief will, the good woman said:

"It's my belief, sir, as he'd had some heavy sorrow in his early life. Other people's troubles seemed to come so nat'ral to him. When my Betty went away, Lord! how good he was to me! He was just like a child, you see; his books and his watering-colours, them was all his life. Everything was a pictur' to him—the little childer in the gutters, the sunset over the chimneys yonder, that layloc tree when it was a-comin' into bloom, it was all a pictur' to him. He'd no visitors but you three gents: it was drawin' or readin' from morning to night. Bless you, there's enough of the dear man's sketches to paper the house from top to bottom. Talk of eatin'!" (no one had talked of eating, I am sure) "it was as much as I could do sometimes to get him to take a snack of anythink. If I didn't look sharp, he'd be a-givin' it to one of them orgin-grinders, for it was nothin' but givin', givin', with some excuse or other, to every blessed soul as come to the house. He'd a' give the coat off his back if I hadn't stopped him. Ah, I shall never see his like again—never!"

The deceased left no relations. What little money he had, had been made by himself; and this he desired might be divided among us four. The only legacies were fifty pounds to the Foundling Hospital; certain specified sketches to G. and W. (the friends now present with me), and the bequest of the remainder, together with all books and papers, to my-

self, as residuary legatee. The books which were not numerous, comprised most of the old poets; some of them in scarce editions, picked up, I doubt not, at bookstalls in the course of nearly forty years' wanderings through London streets; a fine black-letter copy of Chaucer, another of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and a great collection of ancient ballads. The sketches were all of the most ordinary scenes, bits of wind-blown common, with a rusty donkey, and a drove of orange-billed geese, fluttering along open-mouthed: ends of summer evening in some green lane near Hampstead, with a golden twilight melting into purple vapour, through which the dim shadow of two lovers was just discernible. No great Alpine glories, or marvel of southern glow; simple English nature, but touched by a poet's hand, albeit that hand lacked perhaps the boldness of positive genius. Tenderness and refinement were its characteristics; it touched, too tremulously it may be, these common things, but it elevated them at once, nevertheless, into the region of the uncommon. As to the papers, besides a bundle of letters from persons long since dead, which my old friend had carefully docketed, "To be burned when I am no more," the only packet of any bulk was sealed and addressed to me. Within was a manuscript of some length, the portrait of a lady, and a slip of note-paper, on which were these lines:

"MY FRIEND,—

"August 4th, 1869.

"If it shall seem good to you to make known the facts herein told, in whatsoever form you please, do so. The actors in this drama have long since played out their parts. I, who was little more than chorus,

am the last to quit the scene. The reading of this sad play, then, can wound no soul alive: since all whom it concerns are beyond the reach of such hurts. But, it may be, some poor heart, in the sore strait of like temptation, may herein find warning or comfort. Therefore, not without some pain, my friend, have I writ it all down; and to you do I confide these passages of my youth: to give, or to withhold, as you deem wise, when I am gone.

“Your friend,

“G. L.

“P.S.—No eye but mine has seen this portrait for more than forty years. Why I have valued it more than anything I possess (poor daub as it is!) you will understand on reading these pages. Keep it, or burn it, my friend. Its sweet eyes can grieve no one any more on earth now.”

The portrait was that of a dark young woman in a mediæval dress, and resembled in its general character a head by Masaccio. Much of positive beauty in the brow and finely cut nostril, and yet more of an elevated, thoughtful power in the deep-set eyes, overruling the passionate persuasion of the mouth. Whatever might be the history of the person to whom it belonged, the head could not fail to interest any one for whom a strong individual human type has any attraction. I have had that little drawing framed, and it will henceforward hang in my bedroom.

And now, without further preamble, I give Geoffrey Luttrell's narrative, having come to the conclusion that no disasters can arise from the publication thereof.

CHAPTER II.

I WAS a Westminster boy, my father living in the precincts, so that I boarded at home, and my schooling cost him little. He was a poor man, and worked hard to give me that best of privileges—a good education. I was here from the age of seven until seventeen, and all the learning I ever had was then acquired. Four years before I left Westminster, a sturdy little lad named Harry Walbrooke arrived, and became my fag. I never was a bully, and from a fag he grew to be my friend. Why, it would be hard to say. What he can have found to attract him in me I cannot tell. No two boys could be more dissimilar, but he attached himself to me, and from that time forward our friendship never suffered a decline. He was all for athletics—a first-rate runner and jumper, and, though three years my junior, could knock me down like a ninepin. He had good abilities, but he was incorrigibly idle. On the other hand, I, who never had brilliant parts, worked steadily, and to this plodding capacity I attribute my having carried off so many prizes. But then I had not Harry's temptations. I was weakly, and averse from games. The only amusement I pursued with ardour was drawing. While Harry was at football I was scrawling likenesses on the backs of my old copybooks; and proud enough was I if they were recognized. Our social positions were as wide apart as our characters and inclinations. The Walbrookes are a very old Lincolnshire family; and Harry's uncle, Mr. Walbrooke of the Grange, was possessed of very large estates.

He had been married twenty years, and was childless. Harry's father, a dissipated younger brother of Mr. Walbrooke's, had died abroad utterly penniless, leaving two children, Harry and Lena; and these children Mr. Walbrooke had, apparently, adopted. The Grange had been their home ever since their father's death; and though Mr. Walbrooke had other nephews and nieces, there seemed to be no doubt that he meant to make Harry his heir. He was fond and proud of the lad; proud of his riding so well to hounds; proud of the bag he brought home to his own gun when he went out rabbit-shooting; and very proud of his manly address and handsome face. Nothing was too good for Master Harry; he brought back to school more pocket-money, and received more hampers every "half," than any other boy at Westminster. But no one ever grudged him these; for a more generous fellow never lived. He was for sharing everything with those he liked. As to me, knowing I had nothing to give in return, I used to feel ashamed to take all the good things he thrust upon me. The utmost I could do was to help him in his Latin verses, and to tender such wholesome counsel at times as saved him, I believe, from more than one flogging.

I have said the contrast between our social positions was great; but it is not my intention to say more about myself than is absolutely necessary. In undertaking to write this narrative I had other objects in view than to record my own career. This much must be told, however: my father was very poor, I was his only child, and his hope was to have seen me in one of the learned professions. But my taste for art was so pronounced, that, with his usual kindness, he allowed

me to follow the bent of my own inclinations. I became a student of the Royal Academy on leaving Westminster; my friendship with Harry Walbrooke, however, was not snapped asunder, as such intimacies generally are in like cases. On Saturday afternoons I often paid him a visit; and once or twice my father obtained leave to take him to the pit of Drury Lane, where he witnessed Miss O'Neill's acting in *Venice Preserved*, as I well remember. Harry wept plentifully, while I appeared to be unmoved. My father could not understand what seemed to him a contradiction in our characters. But it was not so. Harry's feelings were always demonstrative and uncontrolled; mine, by a tacit understanding with myself, had been used to restraint from a very early age.

The year after I left Westminster, I went for the first time, on Mr. Walbrooke's invitation, to stay at the Grange. It was a fine stately place; and the manner of life there realized all that I had pictured of the grand old English style. There was hospitality without stint and without ostentation; a sense of abundance without extravagance, which, I have since observed, is not as common in the dwellings of the rich as one might expect. This was Mr. Walbrooke's chief virtue. He had no vices; but his excellence—and the world considered him excellent—was of a negative kind. He went to church; he was a Tory; he never quarrelled openly with any of his neighbours, nor exercised any harsh tyranny at home. But then everybody gave way to him, and had given way all his life. He was the most obstinate man I ever knew. When he took up an idea—and one often failed to see what possible object he proposed to himself—he would sa-

crifice everything to carrying it out. He never lost his temper, but he had a persistent way which bore down all opposition. Mrs. Walbrooke was her husband's chief slave. There is little further to be said of her. In person she resembled one of Sir Thomas Lawrence's most affected portraits, but, like them, she represented a gentlewoman. She played on the harp indifferently, and worked in floss silks. She sat at the head of her table gracefully; and had a very pleasant cordial manner, which attracted, until one came to perceive that it meant nothing. She had taken to Harry and Lena, as if they had been her own children, and the girl was fond of her aunt. But neither Mr. nor Mrs. Walbrooke had qualities which obtain a lasting influence over children. Harry's way and his uncle's had not hitherto clashed. In all ordinary matters, the boy had a great ascendancy over his uncle, but the time would come when that obedience which is begotten of admiration and respect for character would not be forthcoming: and I foresaw that the strain upon affection and gratitude would be more than it could stand. For Harry knew his uncle's foibles, and talked of them more openly than I liked, though he loved him, and was fully sensible that all he had he owed to Mr. Walbrooke.

Shortly before my first visit to the Grange a new inmate had come there. She was but a very young girl, yet she had a history. It was this. A curate named Fleming, living near London, had found at his gate one September evening, sixteen years before this, a bundle, which, upon examination, proved to contain a female infant, some few weeks old. Upon her was pinned a paper, with the name "Assunta," written in what was apparently a foreign hand. The child's eyes

and complexion seemed to indicate that she came of Italian parents; but no clue to them could be obtained. The presumption was (taking the infant's age into consideration) that she had been born on the Festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, in honour of which she had been named; and that, driven by some dire necessity, the parents now sought a home for their poor baby at the door of a benevolent man, whose character was well known. It may be well to state here, lest the lovers of sensation should expect a romance upon this head, that nothing was ever known of Assunta's parentage. She may have been the offspring of an organ-grinder. But she had that noble inheritance which is not of this earth, which nothing can give, or take away. Mr. Fleming had been married some few years, but had no children at this time. He was a young man of æsthetic tastes, who indulged far more than his means justified in rare editions, old engravings, and the like. He made an imprudent marriage in every sense of the word, having taken unto himself, at the age of twenty, a girl possessed of nothing but a pretty face. She had grieved and fretted at having no children of her own, and jumped at the idea of adopting this little Italian baby. Her kind husband weakly yielded to her importunity. She told him it was "Christian-like," which it might be, but it was not politic, Christianity and policy not being identical; and the young couple took upon themselves a burden which, as time went on, weighed heavily upon them. In course of years it came to pass that four children were born, and then what to do with Assunta became a serious question. She was remarkably clever; Mr. Fleming taught her himself, and, being

a good modern linguist, as well as a classical scholar, her education was far more thorough than most women's. How Mr. Walbrooke heard of Mr. Fleming, and of Assunta, I forget now; but the idea occurred to him that Lena might learn more with a teacher who was at the same time a companion, than she had done with two governesses of mature experience, who had found the task of instructing her beyond them. It was an experiment, taking such a mere child as Assunta was, in years, to control a somewhat unruly little lady like Lena; but Miss Fleming came ostensibly on a visit to the Grange, and, once there, it became soon apparent that her "visit" would be a permanent one. All hearts, more or less, were laid at the feet of the slight, dark-eyed girl, whose voice and whose smile had a subtle charm, which no other voice and smile I have ever known possessed. What was it about her which was so unlike any other woman? I ask myself now. She always reminded me of one of Francia's or Gian Bellini's Madonnas, in her sweet gravity and girlish dignity; but the mystery of those deep eyes was, at moments, lighted up by passionate flashes, which belonged not to that type of divine calm, the "peace which passeth understanding." With her passionate nature, she had a tendency to melancholy, which, reading her character by the light of subsequent events, I have no doubt was entirely beyond her control, and sprang from causes dating from her birth itself. She could be joyous enough at times, however, and her intense power of sympathy made her a delightful companion for Lena, who soon grew as docile as a lamb in her hands.

I had not been two days at the Grange before I

saw how it would be. She and Harry were nearly of an age (I believe she was a few months older); how could they do otherwise than fall in love with each other? God knows, I suffered enough after that first visit, for many a long year, on her account; yet I was thankful to have had my eyes open to the truth at once. I never had any delusion, never was buoyed up by false hope. I knew she was beyond my reach, and I was loyal to my friend. He possessed everything in the world to make a girl love him; I possessed nothing. It would have been useless to try and enter into rivalry with him, had I been so minded. Though Assunta was more reserved in her manner with Harry than with me, numberless little indications told me that already the girl thought of him with a deep and particular interest; and being given to observe closely, even at that age, I felt certain that if she really gave her heart, it would be until death.

It was summer time, and while Harry was fishing, I used to wander into a beech wood, at the back of the house, ostensibly to sketch. The stream wound its way through the wood, now brawling over pebbles, with the loud voice of shallowness, now stealing over pools in the quiet strength of depth. Gravelly banks, hollowed out by the action of the stream when swollen, and crowned with feathery grasses, overhung the water, leaving scarce soil enough in places to sustain the roots of some slanting beech, whose silvery arms stretched far across the stream. It was of such a spot as this that I was making a study which required much care and more skill than I could then master. I returned to my work several days, and was generally alone; but on one occasion, about midday, Harry joined me. He

was wading slowly up the stream, his trousers tucked above his knees, his bare brown legs gleaming like a Triton's through the silvery water, which he flogged with a pertinacity which had been but ill-repaid, judging by the empty basket slung upon his back. While he stood grumbling at his ill-luck, inveighing against the sun that would shine, and the fish that wouldn't bite, a merry shout, which we both recognized as Lena's, broke from a pathway in the wood hard by. A moment later she came in sight, dragging Miss Fleming along by a scarf she had wound round her waist.

"Oh! here's Harry and Mr. Luttrell," cried the child. "That is capital. I want to get to the other side of the river, to where the foxgloves are, and the bridge is such a long, long way round. You can carry us both over, can't you, Harry? Assunta is not at all heavy."

"I shall be delighted," said the young fisherman, laying his rod on the bank, and slipping off his basket with agility.

"No," said Miss Fleming, quietly, "We can go no further, Lena. We must turn back, now."

"Come, that's very hard," cried Harry. "Sit down, at all events, for a minute, won't you? I've had no luck. I've not caught a thing to-day."

"And so you want to catch us?" laughed his little sister, who was too sharp not to be dangerous company sometimes; "but you won't catch us—you won't—you won't!" she cried, dancing in and out among the thickets, in provocation of pursuit. "We are not to be caught any more than the fish, are we, Assunta?"

"It is time to be going home," said Miss Fleming.

"Come, Lena." But the child was by no means disposed to leave us.

"I am thirsty. I want to drink some of that clear cold water, Harry. I wish I was a fish, I'd come up and look at you, and say, 'Don't you wish you may catch me?' and then dart away, and lie in the shadow of that bank there all day long. Oh, Harry! do give me some water in your hands."

"That's just the way with all impudent little fishes," said her brother, as he stooped and made a cup of his two hands. "They are as cheeky as anything one minute, whisk their tails in one's very face, and the next, they come up and ask to be hooked quite demurely."

But, whether in retaliation for this speech or not, Lena, after a noisy effort to imbibe something from the impromptu goblet, declared it to be a miserable failure—she could not get a drop. Then she stood at the edge of the stream, and tried herself, and the water ran through her fingers, and all down the front of her frock. After which nothing would serve her but that Assunta should make the experiment. The girl's small brown hands hollowed themselves like two close-fitting shells, and reaching down she filled and lifted them to the child's mouth, who clapped her hands with delight, shouting:

"Assunta's done it! Assunta's done it! She didn't spill a drop. And oh! you don't know how good it is! You can't do it, you great clumsy Harry—ask Assunta to give you some."

Then Harry, after sundry efforts, in which I believe he purposely failed, humbly begged Miss Fleming to give him some water in her hands. I think, for one

moment, she hesitated; but to decline was to attach too much importance to an act of child's play. With a faint blush she stooped, and once more filled the cup made by her fingers in the stream. As they stood there, she on the strip of shore, her arms lifted towards him, he in the water a little below her, his fine profile buried in the girl's hands, it was a group ready made for any sculptor. And I seemed to foreread the history of those two lives in the momentary action. She will always be a little above him; but he may drink, an' he list, the pure water of a noble life at her hands.

She dropped them ere he had quite done, and some of the water was spilt. The blood flushed up to her very brow as she turned away. And I knew that he had kissed her hands.

CHAPTER III.

Two years passed. I was often at the Grange in Harry's holidays, and watched, with a keen interest, in which sorrow and bitterness were blent—sorrow which was prophetic for them, bitterness which was the selfish cry of my heart for joy that could never be mine—the progress of the old story. Harry, as he approached manhood, became more and more devoted to Assunta, and she, after her first struggle, gave up her whole heart and soul to him. Of me she made a friend. She little guessed all I suffered; and spoke to me, more unreservedly than she did to any one else, as Harry's Mentor, as one whom she implicitly trusted. She saw that her idol was but human: with brilliant gifts that might lead to his undoing, and set in the

midst of many and great temptations. It is possible that had he been more godlike, she might have loved him less—such are the strange inconsistencies of the human heart. For of all the positions in which a high-souled girl can stand towards a man, that of his good angel is the one which attracts her most.

I have often wondered since that this growing love upon both sides, to which it seemed to me impossible that any one could be blind, should have created no alarm in the minds of Mr. and Mrs. Walbrooke. I can only account for it by supposing that natures, sunk in the slough of a cold conventionality, never dream of the force of a first real passion. It is called "a flirtation among the young people," and is regarded as the measles or any other evil incident to youth, to be "got over" far better when young, than if the epidemic should be taken late in life. Moreover, Harry was at home but for a few weeks, twice a year, and as his comeliness, his prowess in all field sports, and his joviality, made him friends wherever he went, he had plenty of counter-attraction—or what might be supposed to be counter-attraction—in the county, to neutralise the effect of a pair of dark eyes at the Grange. It was thus, I doubt not, that Mr. Walbrooke thought upon the matter, if he troubled his mind at all about it. When Harry was about eighteen, however—he had then left Westminster a year, and was with a private tutor in Sussex—something must have aroused Mr. Walbrooke's long-slumbering prudence. He resolved that Harry, before going to Oxford, should travel for a year, and during that time I did not go to the Grange.

When I next visited it, some few months after the

heir's return, and also after his first term at Oxford, I found Harry much changed, and not for the better, in all ways. He was, indeed, as affectionate towards me as ever, and Assunta's influence, far from having diminished by the year's absence, seemed to have increased. He had also grown into a very handsome man. But he was now impatient of his uncle's control—indeed, of any control but hers; and there was a recklessness, a dare-devilry about him, at times, which made me apprehensive for the future. Still, whenever she was present, he rarely said or did anything which I regretted; but over our wine after dinner—and he sometimes took more than was wise—he frequently conducted himself in a way which annoyed Mr. Walbrooke extremely. Harry had imbibed abroad, or at Oxford, liberal opinions, which he more than once took this occasion to announce. It was in vain that his uncle coughed a stern Tory cough, and that I kicked him under the table; nothing would stop him. Then the presence of certain guests always disturbed his equanimity; notably that of one Mr. Ridgway, who was a constant visitor at the Grange during this period. I had seen this person before, but had never noticed him much. It is necessary, now, that I should describe him.

Theophilus Ridgway, of Hapsbury, was a man of mark in the county, I might almost say in England. He was pre-eminently "the man of taste" of his day; and Hapsbury was the culminating proof of it, which people who care for such things came long journeys to see. It was more like an Italian palace than an English country house, and was open to the charge of incongruity, with its statues, and fountains, and marble

balustrades, in the midst of a bleak Lincolnshire park, where the sun seemed never to shine, if it could possibly avoid it. But the interior possessed miracles of art, collected by Mr. Ridgway in his travels, and the furniture and decorations were all faultless, each room in its particular style, no hopeless jumble of epochs, such as the dwellings of most bric-à-brac hunters exhibit: all that you saw here was genuine, and all (you were told) was in perfect harmony and "keeping:" only, somehow or other, the general effect left upon the mind was disastrously cold and comfortless. Hapsbury was more than twenty miles from the Grange, but we made an expedition there once, in a coach and four, when a party was staying with Mr. Walbrooke. There were Latin inscriptions, I remember, over doorways, upon marble slabs on the terrace, on summer-houses, and sundials—in every possible spot where they could entrap and confound the unlettered, and testify to the elegant classicality of the master of the place. He was, himself, not unlike one of those inscriptions: a marble man, highly polished, gilt-lettered, difficult to read. He had spent a great part of his life in Italy, as some averred, "under a cloud;" clouds, however, being but intangible vapours drawn upwards from the earth, these were regarded by his partisans as the exhalations of a noxious calumny condensed in order to obscure an effulgent reputation. And among his partisans none was stronger than Mr. Walbrooke. That gentleman would never tolerate a word against his friend, and ceased to invite two neighbours who had let fall hints that there were passages in Ridgway's life which would not bear close examination.

All this I learnt upon the visit I am now describing.

He was then a man of fifty, small, well-preserved, with a fine white skin, scarcely creased by age, delicate hands, and a mellifluous voice. His manner was as faultless as his dress, and everything else about him. It was the perfection of good-breeding. If I spoke, he paid as much attention to what the young artist said as to the words that fell from the greatest man at table. He listened with his eyes, he sympathised with his smile, he had always some apposite and graceful rejoinder. No doubt this flattered, and, in a measure, blinded me. Certain it is, that though there was something about the man which baffled me, something which made me doubt, I scarce know why, whether he had any heart, or any principle, I sided with those who thought him very agreeable. His conversation sparkled with anecdote, and occasionally with sarcasm, so sugared that the dull swallowed it unperceived. He indulged sometimes, it is true, in rather too many quotations and allusions to recondite matters which nine out of ten people could not understand; but, after all, it afforded an agreeable contrast to the eternal talk about hounds and horses which prevailed in that fox-hunting district. Mr. Ridgway, I fancy, had never been across a horse in his life. It will be understood that the sort of man I have described would be uncongenial to Harry. In point of fact, he never could tolerate what he termed "that d—d effeminate old prig," and his antipathy was now redoubled by a cause to which I shall come presently. Mr. Walbrooke, however, invited Mr. Ridgway none the less often to his house; indeed, it was remarked that "the man of taste" never had been so constantly at the Grange as during the last six months. And his extreme urbanity towards his friend's nephew

made yet more apparent the younger man's rudeness to his uncle's guest.

Time had wrought only good upon Assunta Fleming. In the world's eyes she was handsomer: a tall, grand-looking creature. In mine, the development of her rare character was what I chiefly saw. Her influence in the household was great, and the love which all bore her was measured chiefly by their capacity for loving. Mr. Walbrooke's was circumscribed within certain reasonable limits; but, as far as his stiff nature would allow, he had a sincere regard for, and an earnest desire to befriend, the penniless foundling. Mrs. Walbrooke's was sentimental and shallow. Lena's was enthusiastic and thorough: she would have gone through fire and water for her friend; and yet Assunta, as I have reason to know, had the delicacy and true wisdom never to make a confidante of Harry's sister. She was fully conscious of her own position, and of his: she knew how unlikely it was that they could ever marry; but every hope of her life was bound up in him, and she could not cast it all from her. She was capable of any sacrifice; but she was scarcely twenty, and with an impassioned, devoted nature, it was asking much to expect in her the prudence to shun a peril which she was too clever not to foresee.

But the difficulties of her position were now complicated by what, to many young women, would have been a subject of triumph and unalloyed satisfaction. It had been confidently asserted that Mr. Ridgway, of Hapsbury, would never marry: that those great estates would pass away to some distant branch of the family: and that Mr. Ridgway himself had expressed perfect indifference as to who should succeed him. He had

never been subjugated by the tender passion, and the requirements of the fastidious "man of taste" were such that no woman, it was supposed, could fulfil them. But it now became tolerably apparent to all of us that Miss Fleming had reached that hitherto unattainable eminence, whence it was just possible that she might be invited to step upon the throne of Hapsbury. Not that Mr. Ridgway could be said to be in love, or anything the least like it; but he admired the girl, as he would have admired any noble work of art, watched her, and listened to her, with all his critical faculties on the qui-vive, and smiled complacently, as though saying to himself: "There is no fault to be found. The picture is in keeping throughout. It is the only thing, the finishing touch, which Hapsbury wants to make it complete."

It was no less evident to me, when I heard our host pressing Mr. Ridgway to return to the Grange, and saw, by what contrivances Assunta was constantly thrown in his way, that Mr. Walbrooke was bent upon bringing this marriage about, if it were possible. Hitherto the girls had dined early; now, Lena being sixteen, it was decreed that, henceforward, she and Miss Fleming should appear at the late dinner; and it was generally contrived that Assunta's place should be next to Mr. Ridgway. On one occasion I remember Mrs. Walbrooke's asking Assunta to drive for her into the neighbouring town upon some errand, and then, after having disposed of Lena in another way, suggesting, at the last moment, as though the thought had just struck her, that Mr. Ridgway should accompany Miss Fleming in her drive, and then they "might go and see the old church together." Such little plots were

of daily occurrence during his several visits. Was Assunta a dupe of them? or was she so entirely absorbed by Harry, that the thought of Mr. Ridgway, as a suitor, never crossed her mind? I could not tell. One thing, however, was certain; she gave her middle-aged admirer no encouragement. She did not dislike him; she heard his conversation with a certain acknowledgment of its merit; she was willing to be instructed about art, and she smiled at his polished witticisms; but it seemed to be very like reading a book, which, while one admits it to be replete with information, and in point of style admirable, lacks all strong power of interest.

It maddened Harry to look on at this. His animosity against Mr. Ridgway reached its culminating point one evening, when Harry lost his temper in an unwarrantable manner. There were several guests in the house; and when we men entered the drawing-room after dinner, Assunta was sitting alone, at a distant table, looking over a portfolio of drawings which had arrived that day. Harry at once drew a chair before her and sat down, so as completely to block the passage to and from the corner where she was. Mr. Ridgway, who had been separated from her during dinner, would have approached, I saw, but could not. I was standing, sipping my coffee, and, as he retired, I chanced to be in his way: he stopped.

"Your artist's eye must be struck by the effect of Miss Fleming's coiffure to-night. That coronet of hair is wonderfully becoming. I never saw her look so handsome."

"I have seen her dressed so very often," said I,

rather curtly; for I was unreasonable enough to dislike hearing him praise her.

"Well, I have not become blasé on it yet," he replied, with a smile; "and I confess I could hardly take my eyes off her at dinner, as she sat opposite me. Like Dante,

—gli occhi su levai,
E vidi lei che si faceva corona."

Here Mr. Walbrooke, who had been fidgeting about for some minutes, and glancing continually in Harry's direction, called out:

"Let us have a rubber. Harry, come and take a hand, sir. Here are Lord George and Mr. Wilmot ready, and Mrs. Wilmot or your aunt will make the fourth."

"They must excuse me, sir. I never play at whist now," said Harry, without rising.

"Never play at whist? Nonsense! Why, I was afraid you did very little else of an evening at Oxford."

"You said you disapproved of it, so I've given it up; at all events, during the long vacation."

"Nonsense! Come, get up at once. You know very well my advice did not apply to a quiet game at home."

"Mr. Henry Walbrooke's charming deference to his uncle's wishes is really touching," murmured Mr. Ridgway to me. "But even virtue may be carried to extreme—eh? You remember what Horace says?

Dum vitant stulti vitium, in contraria currunt.

"You don't think Harry a fool, Mr. Ridgway?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders with a bland smile. "Not more than other florid young Nimrods. They all become brutalized. They all get, more or less, like their horses and hounds. I dare say Nature gave this young gentleman some brains, but, you see, as Sir Guyon says in the Fairy Queen,

— now he chooseth, with vile difference,
To be a beast, and lacke intelligence."

In the mean time, uncle and nephew were still jangling.

"I'm not fit to play, sir. I'm not, indeed. I got a bad cropper to-day, and am horribly stiff."

"There is no more exertion in sitting before a whist-table than before a work-table," said Mr. Walbrooke, with some little asperity.

"My head feels bothered. I'm too dull to play to-night," rejoined Harry.

"Then you had better not inflict your dulness on Miss Fleming."

"That he will not do, Mr. Walbrooke," said Assunta, with a smile, which I saw covered some uneasiness. "If Harry is too tired to play, I will take a hand—that is, if any one will accept so bad a partner."

This, of course, had its desired effect. Harry rose, with a bad grace, and limped across the room to where the whist-table stood. While they cut in for partners, Mr. Ridgway, with that perfect breeding which veneered all his actions, waited a minute or two, and then, without indecorous hurry, glided towards the seat left vacant by Harry, and slid into it. The latter looked as if he would have liked to kick the performer of

this very simple act; and I am sure no amount of stiffness would have prevented him, had he had a fair excuse.

"You will certainly break your neck some day, if you ride in this desperate way," said his uncle, whose serenity being now restored, had leisure to think of his nephew's limbs. "I wish you would be more careful."

"Perhaps you would like me to walk round the garden in goloshes and a fur coat?" retorted Harry. The allusion was too pointed to be missed by any one who heard the words, and I felt confident that Mr. Ridgway's sharp ears caught them. But Harry was in that state of irritation which made him perfectly callous to the effect his intemperate speech might produce, and he continued: "Every fellow who rides runs some risks. I'd rather live the life of a man, and die like one, than be dried up into a whitened fungus—something that is not a man, nor a woman either."

Mr. Walbrooke frowned, and his lips twitched angrily: he turned away. Assunta coloured up to the roots of her hair. Mr. Ridgway, without betraying that he had heard a word, leaned across the table and said, with a bland smile:

"So you are a card-player, Miss Fleming? Do you know that I possess the first pack of cards, said to have been invented to amuse poor Charles the Sixth? If it is true, the world is under a heavy debt of gratitude to that despised monarch for having contributed to relieve its ennui for upwards of four hundred years."

"Have they not always done more to destroy happiness than to increase it?" suggested Assunta, who, from her uneasy glances towards the whist-table, I saw

was lending but a divided attention to the "man of taste's" remarks.

"A fool who is bent on self-destruction will not require cards, Miss Fleming," was his reply. "He will do so by his tongue, by his palate, no matter how — tous les chemins mènent à Rome."

The covert sarcasm, contrasting with Harry's violent breach of good manners, told with double effect. I saw Assunta wince. Like a clever tactician as he was, Mr. Ridgway pursued his advantage no further. He ignored his youthful rival from that moment, and began discussing the drawings that lay on the table before him. There was not a place of which he had not some anecdote, some apt quotation in connection with the scene, or some little-known piece of information, gathered in the by-paths of literature, which he had scoured, and the herbarium of which was carefully dried in his memory. Assunta felt much impressed by his cleverness, though she did not hear above one-half of what he said.

The evening at last came to an end. She had no opportunity of speaking privately to Harry (the whist only broke up after the ladies had left the room); but, as I handed her a candle, she whispered:—

"Will you talk to him, Mr. Luttrell? He is so intemperate, I dread what he may say or do next. Tell him how miserable he has made me this evening, will you?"

The Squire, it was evident, had not got over Harry's last speech. I was not surprised to hear him tell his nephew that he wished to speak to him in Mr. Walbrooke's dressing-room.

"Come to me afterwards, Harry," I said.

And three-quarters of an hour later he entered my room. I saw that something was seriously amiss. He was very pale; and his mouth had a hard-clenched look, which I had rarely seen it wear. He said nothing, but took out his pipe and lit it. I waited for him to begin, but in vain. At last I broke the ground with, "Well, Harry, what passed between you and your uncle? He has been blowing you up, for behaving as you did to-night, I suppose? And really, I must say, your conduct——"

"Now, dear old boy, don't you begin, for I can't stand it. I'm down enough in the mouth as it is. Confound my tongue! I believe it would have been all square if I hadn't spoken."

"Why, what did you say? What has happened?"

"I've had a row—and the long and short of it is, I'm off to-morrow morning."

"Off to-morrow! Where to? I thought the Oxford term didn't begin for another ten days?"

"It does not; but I'm to go to my aunt, Lady Horton's. My uncle says that as I choose to insult old Ridgway, who is to be here a week more, I must go."

I was amazed. I knew that Mr. Walbrooke's obstinacy was capable of making him sacrifice much to the furtherance of any scheme he had taken up; but I had never conceived it possible that it would carry him the length of turning Harry out of doors. I had not taken into account that two ends were to be gained by so doing. After a pause, Harry went on, as he drew a long puff at his pipe, and stared gloomily at the fire.

"But that isn't all—that isn't the worst, Geoff."

"What do you mean? I wish you would tell me distinctly what passed from the beginning, instead of letting it out in driblets."

"Well, then, this is how it was. He began by saying that my manner had been most offensive to Ridgway ever since he came into the house—that he was a friend of his, and a most distinguished man; and as he hoped to see him very often here, I was to understand that he insisted on his guest being treated with proper respect. I replied that I couldn't respect a fellow like that; but owned I had been wrong in saying what I had, and I promised not to repeat the offence. Then my uncle went on to say that the way in which I tried to monopolise Assunta's society had given rise to remarks, and he could tolerate it no longer. It was all very well when I was a boy—this hanging about her—but now, if continued, it would occasion all sorts of slanderous surmises, and would do her a great injury. Fancy that, Geoff! I think I could have restrained my tongue, if he hadn't said that. I had vowed to myself that her name shouldn't pass my lips; but when I heard those words the blood rushed to my brain—and I didn't know what I was doing—I was mad for the minute, or I shouldn't have said what I did. I told him the world would soon know the truth; I loved her better than anything on earth, and only waited to be of age to ask her to share whatever I had. 'And that is simply *nothing*,' said my uncle. 'Of course,' I replied, 'I am aware that if you refuse to let us marry, we must wait—and we *will* wait.' He grew very red, and walked up and down the room. 'You will wait?' he repeated. 'What for, pray? For my death, to inherit this property?

Don't make so sure of that; I have hitherto treated you as my heir, but I need not leave you one farthing, if I do not choose; and I certainly should not do so, if I thought it was likely you would marry in direct opposition to my wishes.' I asked him what fault he could find in Assunta? 'Haven't I heard you say constantly you didn't know another girl to compare with her?' 'That's very true,' he said, 'and I have the greatest regard for Miss Fleming, but I don't choose my heir to marry a foundling; and I should cut you off if you did so.' 'Then you may keep your confounded money,' I cried; 'for I'd sooner never touch a farthing of it than give her up!' I know what she and you will say Geoff. I was a fool, and I knew it, as soon as the words were out of my mouth; but I couldn't help it. My uncle turned coldly away, and for a few minutes he remained silent. At last he said, 'You are a very foolish boy, and ungrateful, too, after all I have done for you. However, I am not going to quarrel with you for a few hasty words; only, I think, after the way in which you have chosen to conduct yourself towards my guest, and now towards me, your remaining here just at present is undesirable. Lady Horton has often asked you to go there when you like. You had better go to-morrow, for the few days before you have to be at Oxford.' I felt stunned, Geoff. Turned out of the house! having to leave Assunta in this way! I couldn't speak for a bit. My blood was cool by this time, and I saw what I had done. There was nothing for it but to beg my uncle to forgive me, and not to send me away. I told him, what was very true, that I was ashamed of having spoken to him as I had done; that I was not ungrateful—that I loved

him for all his kindness to me ever since I was a child, and not for the sake of his money; but that, unfortunately, I hadn't always command over my tongue, and said things, when irritated, which I deeply regretted after. But I promised faithfully that this should not occur again, either as regarded Ridgway or himself, if he would not send me away. But he was inexorable. He kept repeating, with that quiet obstinacy of his, that he thought it much better I should go—and in short, go I must, Geoff!"

"I am very sorry, dear old fellow, but, after all, it might be worse. Though your uncle is obstinate, he has behaved with great forbearance, in treating your speech as an ebullition of boyish folly. But do take the lesson to heart. You grieved Assunta beyond measure to-night. You are proud of your physical prowess, Harry, but what is a man worth who has no self-control?"

"Nothing! I know it," he sighed. "But somehow or other that fellow Ridgway acts upon me as a red rag does on a bull—his white hands, and his quotations, and his confounded civility! And now, you see, Geoff, the brute is making up to Assunta! Suppose"—he stopped and knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and looked at me straight in the face—"suppose, when I'm gone, that the fellow's cleverness gets round her? Suppose she draws comparisons between us?"

"You need fear no comparison," said I, and the pang that shot through me was audible in a sigh. "Nothing can ever displace you in Assunta's heart. Your only anxiety now, Harry, should be to cause her no pain, to make yourself more worthy of her. Patience and courage, and all will come right. Only remember,

the last way to mollify your uncle is to take the tone with him you have done to-night."

"What am I to do, Geoff? Pretend to give in to my uncle? Not go near my darling when I'm here? I can't do that, I can't be a humbug. She shall be my wife, or no other woman shall. Nothing shall make me go back from that. God knows I love her better than anything on earth, Geoff, and I'll die before I give her up."

He leaned his head between his hands, and by the movement of his shoulders I knew he was more agitated than he liked me to see. The old butler had brought to my room a tray with brandy and seltzer-water, by Harry's orders. Presently he raised his head, and, pouring out nearly half a tumbler of brandy, drank it off pure.

"Old boy," I said gently, "don't get into the habit of having recourse to that whenever you are in trouble. You won't find the bottle a good friend, but a terribly extortionate one, who demands more and more for every drop of temporary comfort he administers."

I believe he scarcely heard me. All words that were not on one subject were wasted at that moment. The stimulant seemed to have no other effect than that of calming him. He said, in a minute or two, "I must see her alone, Geoff, to-morrow before I go. Give me a pen and ink, and I'll slip a piece of paper under her door as I pass."

I pushed the blotting-book across the table to him, and he wrote a few lines.

"You'll write to me, Geoff?" he said, as he wished me good-night. "You'll tell me truly all that goes on, won't you?"

"I will; but when you are gone, perhaps Mr. Walbrooke may not care for me to remain."

The next morning, at breakfast, I knew at once, by Assunta's marble stillness, that she and Harry had met, and that she knew all. There was no uneasiness, no anxiety, such as she had evinced the night before; it was the calmness of misery, that has little or no hope. Mr. Walbrooke announced, in a little set formula, that his nephew had received a letter which called him suddenly to his aunt, Lady Horton's. Harry himself said little. Mrs. Walbrooke sent a message to Lady Horton about a particular shop where to get floss silks. Whereupon Mr. Ridgway, who was in unusually brilliant spirits, entered into a dissertation upon embroidery from the earliest ages, described what the "vesture of gold wrought about with divers colours" was probably like, which the king's daughter of Scripture wore, and thence, by a natural progression, got to that royal piece of work, the Bayeux tapestry. Harry bore it all with exemplary fortitude; perhaps because he was too down-hearted, poor fellow, to be irritable. Then, after breakfast, the dog-cart, with his portmanteau in it, came round to the door, and he bade us good-bye. To take leave of what one loves best, when it is necessary to repress any exhibition of feeling, must always be trying; doubly so at Harry's age, and to one of his temperament. But both he and Assunta went through it bravely. I saw it cost him an effort to shake Ridgway's hand, but he did it; and then, embracing Lena and his aunt, he jumped into the cart, and drove off to meet the "stage," which passed some six miles from the Grange.

CHAPTER IV.

"LUTTRELL," said the squire, turning to me as soon as the dog-cart was out of sight, "I hope that Harry's sudden departure will make no difference in the length of your visit to us. Remember that the longer you can remain with us the better pleased we shall be."

I thanked him, and said it would give me great pleasure to stay on a little longer at the Grange.

In the course of the morning I saw Assunta walking alone in the garden. I joined her. "This is an unfortunate affair," I began. "Harry's imprudence last night did more mischief than we were aware of."

"My poor Harry! my poor boy!" she sighed. "Ah! Mr. Luttrell, but that was not the real cause of his being sent away. If it had not been for me he would have been scolded for his impertinence to Mr. Ridgway, and there would have been an end of it. It is I who have driven him away."

"No, it is his speaking as he did to his uncle. The most ordinary caution and a sense of what was due to Mr. Walbrooke would have obviated it. But there is no use in crying over spilt milk. You must not be too cast down by what has occurred. If Harry can only be got to restrain himself for the future, all will be well in time, I have no doubt. That he will remain faithful to you I am very sure; and I believe in the accomplishment of almost anything on earth with time and perseverance."

"Time? Ah! but youth so soon flies, and life it-

self is very short. Will he care for me when I am old and withered? Then perhaps he may be free to marry me."

"But fond of you as all are here," I said, "and with the influence you have in the family, Mr. Walbrooke will certainly yield, sooner or later, when he finds that Harry's whole happiness depends on it."

She shook her head. "You do not know him, nor does Harry, as I do. Look at Beauty there in the park, Mr. Luttrell. She is Mr. Walbrooke's favourite mare. He goes to her stall every morning and feeds her with carrots. She may run where she likes, provided she does not jump this fence, and get into the garden. Oh! then she would be very quickly driven out. Harry's heart is their garden. I may do what I like except enter there. But they can't keep me out—they can't!" she repeated with a triumphant energy, at variance with the despondency with which she had hitherto spoken.

"Then you ought to be happy," I said, with an involuntary sigh. "All the rest is, comparatively, of no importance."

She looked up with her dark earnest face into mine. "But I must not be his ruin. He must not sacrifice everything to me. Oh! Mr. Luttrell, no one will ever know how I fought against this love at first, seeing what it must come to! And now, what am I to do? I ask myself, what am I to do?"

"Nothing. Just wait, and trust to time. To you, dear Miss Fleming, and to Harry also, this is my first word and my last."

Two days went by. Mr. Ridgway's assiduities, uninterrupted now by the jealousy of Harry, seemed to

increase. Assunta was a little graver, but otherwise appeared in company much as usual. The third morning a card of invitation appeared on the breakfast-table, which gave rise to an animated discussion. There had for some time past been a talk of a fancy ball at Hevoir Castle. It was now something more than rumour; the day fixed was just three weeks distant. Lena, who was of course not yet "out," had been promised by her uncle that she should go to this exceptional entertainment, which, being given in a fine old baronial building, promised to be a spectacle of great brilliancy. Mr. Ridgway and I were referred to, to suggest dresses; but as he knew far more about the correct costume of various epochs than I did, my help was limited to a few arrangements of colour, and to making a sketch from recollection of a female portrait by some Italian of the fifteenth century, the head-gear of which, it occurred to me, would suit Assunta. Mr. Ridgway at once supplied every deficient detail; he had a Giorgione at Hapsbury with a similar costume, which he sent for, together with a great variety of old Venetian and Genoese stuffs, which he begged Miss Fleming to make use of. Nor did his generosity stop short here, in which case it would no doubt have been declined. Among his treasures was a dress in rare preservation, which had belonged to Marie Antoinette when a girl. It was a sort of Dresden-china-shepherdess attire, with wreaths of delicately-embroidered roses on a blue ground. It fitted Lena's narrow little body as if it had been made for her; and the commode and sacque became her slender dimensions vastly. As for myself, money was a great consideration to me at that time, as he possibly guessed; and when Mr. Walbrooke

insisted upon my remaining over the ball, Ridgway good-naturedly bethought him of a muleteer's dress which he had brought from Spain, and which he begged me to wear. Of infinite resource, helpful, ever courteous, why was it I could not like this man?

Shortly after this he went home; but he was to return for the ball, Hevoir Castle being only four miles from the Grange. He had, I think, by this time, almost, if not definitely, made up his mind to propose to Assunta; but a little delay could do no harm. And at this moment the important subject of his costume demanded a good deal of attention. The night before his departure a slight incident occurred which I remember made an impression on me, and which may have influenced the destinies of those about whom I am writing more than was apparent.

In addition to the guests in the house, Mr. Walbrooke had invited some distant neighbours to dinner. There was a large party; in all, five-and-twenty. Among them was a Sir Robert Something and his daughters, who had lately returned from Italy, where he had lived many years for the education of his children. He was a poor but very proud man, whose character stood high in the county, but whose manners were not pleasing. Mr. Walbrooke was not intimate with him. He lived too near the Grange to be invited to stay there, and yet a long hill and bleak moor interfered with constant intercourse. Indeed, this was the first time he had ever dined at the Grange, I believe, having, when his daughters were children, declined all such doubtful pleasures as an eight-mile drive to a country dinner-party. I should add that his

house lay in precisely the opposite direction to Hapsbury.

I was standing behind the outer circle of chairs and ottomans, as awkward young Englishmen do before dinner, near to no one I knew, and consequently at liberty to watch my neighbours' movements. Not far off sat Mr. Ridgway, next to Assunta, but less talkative than usual, it appeared to me. I should almost have said that he was not perfectly at his ease, if that had been possible of a man whom, it was proverbial, nothing ever put out. At all events, I knew, by the rapid movement of his cold blue eye, from time to time, that he was on the alert to listen to everything that went on around him. The guests were now all arrived; several introductions took place. Presently Mr. Walbrooke, taking Sir Robert's arm, drew him out of the circle, and, as he believed, no doubt, out of ear-shot.

"I don't think you know Ridgway, of Hapsbury, do you?" I heard him ask. "The other side of the county, you know."

"Who?" said Sir Robert, with a surprise which, if assumed, did credit to his acting.

"Ridgway, the great man of taste, one of the cleverest fellows you ever met, who——"

"So I have heard. No, I don't know him, *and I had rather not.*"

The emphasis is not mine, but his. He spoke those words so distinctly that I have not a doubt but that the subject of this colloquy heard them. Sir Robert throughout the evening avoided even the side of the room where Mr. Ridgway was. And Mr. Walbrooke's obstinacy was wounded even more than his friendship.

I doubt if the baronet was ever asked to the Grange again. But those words left their mark.

I wrote to Harry very fully of all that happened. He was now at Oxford, and having passed a dreary time of it with his old aunt, was in a condition to appreciate his return to college and to the society of his friends. Certainly his spirits rose. When I wrote to him touching the ball at Hevoir, instead of replying in the despondent strain he had assumed of late, he answered, with gay impudence, that he hoped Assunta would look her very best, and take as much pains with her appearance as if he were to be present.

"What a coxcomb he is getting," said I, laughing.

She smiled rather sadly. "Is it coxcombry to speak the truth? He knows it is as he says. I should only care to look well to be seen by him."

His letters to her, of course, I never saw. He wrote constantly, and she fed upon his words in secret, quoting a passage to me now and then, but that she was not at ease concerning him I well knew. The Love that enters into the heart of a woman like Assunta is not blind; it is a mistake to paint him so.

CHAPTER V.

THE night of the ball arrived at last. When Assunta appeared in the drawing-room before our departure, there was a universal exclamation. She had never looked so handsome before. She certainly never looked so handsome again. She wore the dress in which I made the sketch of her, my friend, which you possess. Some persons gain by rare clothes, carrying

any unusual garments with a natural grace, as if accustomed to them. Assunta was of this number, and so was Mr. Ridgway. In its way his was, perhaps, the greatest triumph of the evening. As Louis the Fifteenth, in a dress of lemon-coloured satin and silver, with the legitimate aids of powder, rouge, and patches, he might have passed for a man of thirty. His light figure and well-turned leg showed to great advantage in the courtly costume of that epoch of frippery, and he carried his three-cornered hat, his snuff-box, and his jewelled cane with an ease which contrasted pleasantly with the crowd of awkward cavaliers, disconsolate, and apparently much ashamed of themselves, under curly wigs, broad hats and plumes, and whose swords were always coming into disastrous propinquity with their legs.

As we entered the ball-room I heard one old lady say to another:

"That is the girl, that handsome one in the odd dress."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the other. "How can her friends sacrifice her thus? She is very handsome."

"Yes; but her birth, you see. And she is quite dependent upon the Walbrookes. It is a very great marriage for a girl in her position to make. I know more than one who tried for it. After all, he is a charming man; there's no denying it; so much taste. And I dare say all those horrid stories are false. Depend upon it, when he is once married they will be forgotten."

I heard no more. The crowd closed between us, and I passed on. It was a brilliant pageant, the first and last sight of the kind I have ever seen. It is all

before me very distinctly now. Of what use to describe it? such scenes are familiar to you; and if I had the magic power to make it rise up before your eyes it would not impress you as it did the raw youth to whom it seemed the embodiment of a hundred brilliant pictures, the figures standing out upon a rich subdued background of tapestry, carved oak, and stone.

Assunta did not dance much. She attracted a good deal of attention, as much by the rumours that were afloat as by her beauty, I doubt not. And Mr. Ridgway justified these rumours by scarcely leaving her side. If he had hesitated hitherto he did so no longer. She had been submitted to the test of public opinion, and that many-tongued voice was almost unanimous in deciding her to be not only very handsome, but unusually distinguished in carriage and manner. The fastidious "man of taste" was satisfied. I thought I read all this in the open proclamation of his devotion which he made; there could be no doubt, for there was no disguise, about the fact. Others were to be warned off these premises. Assunta was, I am sure, unconscious that her name was coupled with Mr. Ridgway's and listened, as she always did to him, with attention, replying sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a word, sometimes a little wearily perhaps. By-and-bye a fat, gossiping woman came up, and whispered a word or two in her ear, accompanied by shrewd nods and becks. Assunta coloured crimson, and from that moment I saw that she was ill at ease, and made an effort to get away from her admirer. She changed her seat, she consented to dance, she asked me to take her into the refreshment-room; but whenever she returned to the neighbourhood of Mrs. Walbrooke, there was Ridgway.

I stood exactly opposite, where I could watch every movement of her countenance, and between us was the entrance door of the ball-room.

It was past twelve o'clock, and the revel was at its height, when, looking at Assunta, I saw her eyes fastened upon this door, through which a great crowd was streaming, with an expression of wonderment, joy, and terror, such as I could not account for. At that moment the crowd gave way a little, and I beheld Harry! Harry, whom we all believed to be a hundred miles away, and hoped was imbibing wisdom from the breast of Alma Mater. It took away my breath; but I pushed my way to him as fast as I could. Before I could reach him, however, he had joined the little group, where Assunta sat near Mrs. Walbrooke, and Mr. Walbrooke and Lena were standing. As to Mr. Ridgway, he had sauntered down the room with the cautious carelessness of a man who knows how to extricate himself from an awkward position. The reception Harry met with was characteristic of the various members of his uncle's family.

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Walbrooke, "How very odd! Where did you spring from, Harry? And such a beautiful dress. Very becoming, too. What is it? Oh a hunting dress of George the First. Charming! So very nice. You didn't come in it all the way from Oxford, did you?"

"Oh, you darling duck!" exclaimed the Dresden shepherdess, jumping up, and standing on tip-toe, in an ineffectual effort to reach his cheek with her pretty lips. "How glad I am. It seems an age since we saw you. You look just like an angel in powder, going out hunting; doesn't he, Assunta? How good

of you to come. What fun! This is the one thing that was wanting to make the ball perfect."

Assunta said nothing. I thought he looked disappointed; yet her eyes were more eloquent than any words.

"What mad freak has brought you here, Harry?" asked his uncle, with knit brows. "Have you got leave? If not, you will be rusticated, or get into a terrible scrape, at all events."

"No," replied Harry; "certain little circumstances prevented my getting leave, so I came off without it. I shall be able to say with truth that I did not sleep out of Oxford. You see I only miss to-morrow's prayers. I was present this morning, and set off in my tandem as soon as they were over, took the stage after five-and-twenty miles, which brought me a good part of the way. The remainder of the journey I performed in any rattletrap I could pick up from one village to another, until I found myself at the King's Head, close to this, an hour ago. I return in the same way, as soon as the ball is over. I calculated all the costs," added Harry, laughing, "and I thought it was worth it."

"H'm!" grunted Mr. Walbrooke; "I don't know what your calculations are like. It will cost you, or rather me, fifty pounds, if it costs a penny."

"Well, Uncle Jack, we'll set that down in the place of my whist, which you complained of. At all events, this is a harmless amusement, and will entail no worse consequences than a wiggling."

"I don't know that. I am not so sure of its being harmless," muttered the squire, but in so low a tone, that Harry, who had turned to Assunta, did not hear

him. Harry bent a little over her, so that his words were inaudible; then presently he stood erect, and I heard him ask her to give him the dance which was just beginning. Mr. Walbrooke fidgeted, and looked round the room, and at the same moment Mr. Ridgway came up.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Fleming; I think this is our quadrille."

She had risen, and had actually taken Harry's arm. Mr. Ridgway smiled at Harry with a polite bow. Harry repaid it with a freezing nod. She coloured, and was sorely perplexed.

"You will excuse Miss Fleming. She has just promised me this dance," said Harry.

"She forgot that she was engaged," interrupted Mr. Walbrooke, quickly. "She cannot, of course, give up a prior engagement."

Harry, glaring and fuming on one side, Mr. Ridgway, bland but inexorable on the other, resolved not to relinquish his right, nor yield an inch of his ground; between them Assunta looked sadly distressed. Justice was so manifestly on the one side, that she felt she must yield, or mortally offend Mr. Walbrooke, and harm both Harry and herself perhaps irreparably. With a look of supplication up at him, she at last disengaged her arm, and placed it in Mr. Ridgway's. They walked away, and Harry's face, so beaming five minutes before, was now black as thunder. He said nothing, but his eyes followed them as they took their places in the quadrille, and his nostrils dilated as he watched the very ostentatious devotion of Assunta's partner. Now Mr. Ridgway bent down, and whispered something witty—about their *vis-à-vis*, perhaps—for Assunta, in spite of her annoyance, could not help

smiling; now he was examining her bouquet, and telling some very long story, in that confidential manner which in itself looks like an avowal to the spectators.

Just then ill-luck brought one of Harry's numerous friends, a coarse, tactless fellow, past where we were standing. Seeing the direction in which Harry's gloomy face was turned, the man stopped, and catching hold of Harry's arm, with a laugh, cried in a hoarse whisper, which pierced through violins and clarionets, "So your nose is put out of joint in that quarter, eh, Walbrooke? I hear it's all settled. I don't envy the girl. However, that's her look out. Ha! ha!"

Harry made no reply; one would have said that he had not heard the words, but for the way in which he changed colour, and turned away sharply. The man passed on, and Harry's bitterness at last found vent in words.

"So it's a settled thing is it, Geoff? Well, it was worth coming from Oxford to know this. What a fool a man is ever to trust a woman!"

"What a fool you are, Harry, to let your jealousy blind you in this way, and to listen to the gossip of an idiot like that. There is not a word of truth in what he or any one else says about this."

"How do you know? She is not likely to tell you. Look at them there. No one can say there isn't some ground for the report! Why did she dance with him if she doesn't encourage him?"

"How could she help it when she was engaged? And if she had refused him at first, of course she could have danced with no one all the night."

"She should have thrown him over. If she had cared for me she would."

"And have made your uncle furious, and have done you both incalculable mischief! How foolish you are, Harry, not to see that all your endeavour now should be to conciliate him."

"I can't say I feel much inclined to try," said Harry, between his teeth, "when I see him doing all he can to ruin my happiness. But there's no use standing here. Let us come into the supper-room, Geoff. I've had nothing to drink, and I'm as thirsty as the devil."

There was a knot of young fellows there drinking champagne, who greeted Harry very warmly (as, indeed, did every one we met). Those were the days when men did drink at country balls; I know not what they may do now; and soon, to my vexation, he was trying to drown his troubles in the bottle, and assuming a gaiety which I knew was far from real. I dreaded, and with good reason, the effect of much wine on him in his present excited state; and as I watched the wild recklessness with which he tossed off tumbler after tumbler, I hesitated whether it would not be well to fetch Mr. Walbrooke, whose remonstrances might have more weight than mine. The fear of doing more harm than good—if Harry should forget himself in speaking as he had once done, to his uncle—deterred me; but I would not leave him, and urged him, whenever I could make myself heard, to return with me to the ball-room. A long half-hour passed thus, and it became evident to me that the wine was beginning to take effect; the dull glitter of the eye told its tale, the hand that raised the glass was less steady.

"Why were you not out with us, yesterday, Walbrooke?" said a man who had just come in. "A glorious run of five-and-forty minutes without a check."

"He wasn't here. He was having an inglorious run—away from Oxford," laughed another.

"Oh! Ah! by-the-bye, I heard Ridgway say just now——"

"What did you hear him say?" asked Harry, fiercely.

"Oh! he was only chaffing, in that sarcastic way of his, about your being packed off to school, a month ago, for getting screwed—and that, now you had run away, your uncle was going to send the naughty little boy back to get a whipping."

"He said that, did he?" Harry ground his teeth. "Some one else will get a d—d good whipping, I can tell him, if he doesn't look out."

"Oh! he was only joking, my dear fellow."

"I will teach Mr. Ridgway not to joke about me," cried Harry, filling his glass again.

"Take care, Walbrooke. Though he's such an effeminate-looking fellow, I'm told he is not to be trifled with. They say that he really killed a man in Italy."

"If he did, it was behind his back!" and Harry gave a contemptuous laugh. "He has not pluck to stand up in a fair fight, or I'd have a round with him in the court-yard. A sneaking scoundrel, who palavers one to one's face, and stabs one with his tongue when one isn't present to give him the lie!"

It was at this moment that Assunta entered the room upon Ridgway's arm. The quadrille had been long since over, and Assunta, who, during the dance

had caught sight of Harry's lowering face from time to time in the crowd, and had then suddenly missed it, had sat down, as I afterwards learnt from her, a prey to serious anxiety about him. Where was he? Why did he not come to her? Surely he was not so unreasonable as not to forgive her for leaving him? And where was Mr. Walbrooke? She prayed to Heaven that he and Harry might be having no altercation! This nervous terror at last got the better of every other consideration. She would sooner have asked any one in the room to give her an arm than Mr. Ridgway; but no one else was near, and she could bear this suspense no longer. Under the pretext that she wanted a glass of water, she asked him to take her through the rooms. No doubt Mr. Ridgway divined the cause of this sudden thirst; and perhaps a shrewd suspicion of where and how they would find Harry made him nothing loth to assist in the search.

"Ah! here is our young friend," he whispered, as they entered the supper-room. "Very jovial, I see, wine-cup in hand. He should have come as Bacchus; only wants the thyrsus and ivy-wreath. And such an abundant flow of words, too! He might have played the part of his own magpie. The magpie, you know, Miss Fleming, was dedicated to the god of wine."

"Mr. Ridgway," said Harry, advancing with no very steady gait, and with a flaming face, "will you be good enough to repeat before me what you have been saying of me behind my back?"

"Harry, Harry! for Heaven's sake!" murmured Assunta.

"Perhaps you will reconduct Miss Fleming to the

ball-room, and then meet me in the court-yard to give me this explanation," continued Harry.

Mr. Ridgway shrugged his shoulders, with a smile.

"I have none to give, my dear young gentleman. I paid you a pretty compliment just now, in saying you were god-like, with that wine-cup in your hand. Bacchus *was* a gentleman—it was only his satyrs who were boisterous and vulgar," added Mr. Ridgway, with a little drawl.

"You have been turning me into ridicule, then, for Miss Fleming's amusement, also, have you?" roared Harry, who was now fairly beside himself.

"Harry, dear Harry! pray——" supplicated Assunta, taking his arm; but it seemed as if her voice, on this occasion, only maddened him the more.

"I am like Bacchus—am I? There shall be one point of resemblance the less very quickly. The wine shall no longer be in my hand. I'll make you a present of it."

And so saying, he raised his arm, and would have dashed the champagne full in Mr. Ridgway's face, but that the glass was struck from his hand at the same moment, and shivered on the floor. A few drops only did in their transit reach the sleeve of Mr. Ridgway's yellow satin coat. It was Mr. Walbrooke, who, in the very nick of time, had arrived on the scene to avert what must have led to a terrible catastrophe. Alas! would it not have been better to have let Fate work her will then, instead of holding her hand for a time? We, in our short-sightedness, regarded it then as a mercy: I cannot do so now.

That scene is before me still; Harry, like some wild animal held at bay, between Assunta and Mr.

Walbrooke; Ridgway, with admirable coolness, wiping the splashes from his sleeve with a laced handkerchief; the circle of silent spectators—I see it all. The mad boy was at length dragged away by his uncle and Assunta; vociferating loudly, and calling upon Mr. Ridgway to fight him, when and where he liked. I thought it better to stay, and plead what extenuation I could for Harry.

“Our young friend,” said Mr. Ridgway, with a light laugh, in reply to my excuse that a little wine quite turned Harry’s head, and rendered him unaccountable for his actions, “our young friend has not studied drinking as a fine art. Do you remember what Rabelais says? ‘Boyre simplement et absolument. . . . aussy bien boyvent les bestes.’ This young gentleman may be said to drink ‘absolument,’ eh? much as the carps do. ’Twere vain to expect much more self-control in him than in them.”

“I hope you will forgive him, Mr. Ridgway,” I said.

“Oh, dear, yes;” but though he smiled, there was an expression in his eye which struck me unpleasantly, and which I thought of long after. “Not that he will apologise, Mr. Luttrell. A man needs to be a gentleman to own himself in the wrong. But I am glad he did not throw the wine in my face, because I suppose the conventional laws of society would have obliged me to call him out, which I had rather not do. As it is—suppose we have some of this aspic de volaille? I declare I am quite hungry.”

In the course of time Mr. Walbrooke rejoined us.

“Ridgway,” he began, “I am more grieved and ashamed of my nephew’s conduct than I can express

to you. I believe I have brought him to some sense of shame, himself. At all events, when he is really sober (which he will not be for some time), I feel sure that he will deplore his behaviour this evening. If I did not know you to be one of the kindest and most forbearing of men, I should not know how to ask you to return with us to the Grange. Our scapegrace, however, will not be there—he returns to Oxford at once.”

“He will not shake hands with me, I suppose?” Mr. Ridgway smiled sweetly. “He will not afford me the gratification of forgiving him? Well, well, my dear Walbrooke, he is right. He knows the bitter farce of that inducement to forgive a man, ‘by so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head.’ Though scriptural, not quite charitable, eh? Who can be expected to empty the coalbox on his own head? No, the least said in this matter the soonest mended; and when Master Harry and I next meet, it will be quite forgotten.”

The squire said little more on the subject, but began to talk of going home: it was two o'clock, and Lena was unused to late hours, and Mrs. Walbrooke was tired, and it was a cold night—and—in short, a number of transparent pretexts for avoiding the possibility of another collision between the belligerents. The poor little shepherdess, who was ignorant of all that had been going on, was in despair at the summons, being engaged for the next two dances; but no one ever attempted to appeal against a fiat of Mr. Walbrooke's. I volunteered to look for Miss Fleming, while the Squire sent his servant to the stables for the

carriage; but I had not proceeded far on my search before Harry's uncle overtook me.

"Mr. Luttrell, I cannot trust myself to speak to that boy again to-night. His conduct has exasperated me beyond endurance. Over and above his insolence to Mr. Ridgway, he has thought fit to question *my* conduct in a way I will not stand. He chooses to fancy himself in love with Miss Fleming, and to resent the fact of any one else's paying her any attention. Now I wish you to convey this message to him from me. Until he promises me that this absurd folly shall cease, I do not mean him to return to the Grange. I will not be subject to a recurrence of such scenes as to-night's—or such insolence as obliged me to send him from the Grange. When he can behave himself properly, and will express some contrition for his conduct, I will receive him, and not before. He has his allowance, and can spend the vacation where he pleases. Be good enough to tell him that from me."

I found them together in a deserted room at the end of the suite, standing by an open window. It was a clear frosty night, which, under ordinary circumstances, would not have invited the admission of more air than necessary. But Assunta, regardless of herself, had opened the window; for Harry's head was burning, and she believed that the keen sharpness of the night would restore him sooner than anything. What had passed between them I knew not, but that he had forgotten all his jealous suspicions of her, was clear. Their hands were linked together, and they stood there like two sorrowful children, silent with the traces of tears upon their cheeks, looking out into the deep peaceful sky, lit by its myriad stars.

"You are summoned, Miss Fleming," I said, "and you and Harry had better say good-bye here, for the Squire does not wish to see him again to-night. If you remain here Harry, I will return to you, and find my way back to the Grange somehow."

Poor young hearts! Had either of them a foreboding of the future when they bade each other that farewell? I only know that Assunta's face was white and rigid as the face of death when she joined me in the next room—for I had sauntered away from them. She said not a word. We found Mrs. Walbrooke in the bustle of cloaking. Ten minutes afterwards they drove off, and I returned to Harry. We had a long conversation, which it is needless to repeat here. I told him, as gently as I could, the substance of his uncle's words, and implored him to exercise a little discretion in his communications with Mr. Walbrooke. The Squire was greatly incensed, I said, and infinite tact would be required to adjust matters; one false step, one hasty letter, might prove irreparable.

He was sober enough now, and seemed heartily ashamed, less of his behaviour to Ridgway than of having unjustly suspected Assunta, and of having allowed himself to be drunk in her presence. "I suppose," he said sadly, "the doors of the old house will be shut against me now for a time. I will write nothing, if I can help it, to offend my uncle; I promise you, Geoff, to be discreet, and on paper I think I can be, better than in talking. But if he expects," he added, with a rekindling of the old fiery pride, "if he expects that I am going to truckle to him for his money, if he expects to get any promise out of me about Assunta, he is mistaken. I will never say or do

anything to lead him to suppose that I give her up. It's as much as I shall be able to do to keep silent, knowing that that scoundrel is constantly near her, and that it is my uncle's doing."

I walked with him, under the star-lit sky, to the King's Head; I helped him to stuff his fine clothes into a valise, and don something more suitable to a journey through England in this nineteenth century. Then a dog-cart came round to the inn-door: Harry wrung my hand, jumped on the seat, and drove away in the frosty night; the lamps sending weird lights upon the hedge, on either side, which were visible for half a mile along the straight and level road.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT I had long foreseen came to pass the next day. Mr. Ridgway formally proposed to Assunta; and was rejected. That a man of his acute perceptions should not have been prepared for this result to his wooing seemed difficult to believe. Had Miss Fleming been a different sort of person, it might have been looked for that the disgrace and banishment of Mr. Walbrooke's heir should have inclined her to view with favour a marriage which presented so many solid advantages as the one now offered to her. But Mr. Ridgway was too keen-sighted to misjudge, though he was incapable of valuing at its true worth, the character of the woman whom he now desired to raise to the throne of Hapsbury. She had had a girlish fancy for the "good-looking young calf," who had so signally disgraced himself last night, and she must feel heartily

ashamed of him. On the other hand, she had often shown a certain amount of pleasure in his, Mr. Ridgway's society; it required no uncommon vanity in a man, who had cultivated the arts of pleasing for nearly fifty years, to believe that the contrast between coarseness and refinement must make itself felt by Assunta at this moment, very much to the advantage of the latter. As to love, he would probably have smiled sarcastically at the question of its existence, on one side or the other. She was a charming young woman; agreeable and distinguished in person, and sufficiently intelligent to be receptive of his instruction, at such times as he might feel disposed to converse—for your brilliant men of society are apt to be taciturn in strict domesticity. And as to himself, why, he was—what he was; he had never indulged in illusions as to girls falling in love with him, or he might have been captured, ere this, by one of the numerous young ladies who, at various periods of his career, had desired to reign at Hapsbury. Fortunately he did not believe in “*les grandes passions*,” in his own case, at least. No; love was an entirely unnecessary ingredient in the marriage-mixture: liking was a solvent of sufficient strength to melt the harsher quantities of that mixture into a cool and not unpalatable beverage.

Thus, only, could I account for the blunder Mr. Ridgway committed, in believing that he had but to propose to be accepted. He regarded Assunta as too sensible to waste her life on a vain shadow; her eyes had been open to the futility of any expectations she might have formed with regard to Harry: and now that the substantial reality of independence, coupled with an agreeable companion, was offered her, how

could she refuse? But she did refuse; much to his surprise, something to his annoyance, and more to his contempt. She had not a philosophic soul; she was no better than other women, then, in this respect; that she allowed an idiotic fancy to usurp the place of some more rational feeling, which was all that philosophy needed to enable two human beings to live placidly together.

He returned to Hapsbury that afternoon, and Assunta was left to the mercy of Mr. Walbrooke. What that mercy was may be gathered from the fact that he was closeted with her for upwards of an hour; after which I was unable to get speech of her, for she pleaded fatigue to retire to her bed. The next morning I received news of my father's serious illness, which called me suddenly to London; but I managed to have a few minutes' conversation alone with Assunta in the library before my departure. She looked sallow and worn, poor child, that morning—the world and Mr. Ridgway would have said almost plain. To me she never seemed more lovable and interesting. She sat down wearily on one of the great leather chairs, and leaned her head on her hand. Then she told me something of what had passed between the master of the house and herself, and of what she felt to be the peculiar and terrible difficulty of her present position.

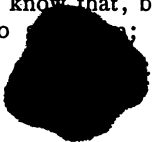
"He is so kind in his own way—he has been more like a relation to me than a master—that when he tells me how fatal it would be to all his views for Harry that we should marry, I feel as if I were a monster of ingratitude to oppose him. If I could be persuaded that it was really for Harry's benefit to give me up, I would show him the example—cost me what

it might, Mr. Luttrell. It is this breaks my heart. I have not slept all night, thinking what I ought to do. Mr. Walbrooke says I am mistaken in fancying I have much influence over Harry; and, alas! I almost feel as if he were right. I am afraid it cannot be very great, since he can be swept hither and thither by every impulse of the moment. I ask myself, 'Shall I not be as a millstone round his neck? Will the day not come when he will regret having married the penniless foundling?'"

"Never; unless he do so precipitately," I replied at once. "And this I am sure you will not consent to. You have but one course, both of you: to try and wear out the squire's patience. It is a case of two to one; for all this family are so attached to you that I am sure they will not hear of your leaving them."

She coloured, and with a sad little smile said, "Unless it is, as the maids say, 'to better myself,' or what Mr. Walbrooke considers is to better me. For that he is urgent—nay, positively angry at my rejection of wealth and social position. What are they all to me without Harry?"

"Is it final," I asked, "this rejection?"

"Final," she replied; and no more passed between us on the subject. We returned again to Harry. She bitterly deplored his having by this fresh outrage yet further incensed his uncle. "Mr. Walbrooke says that until I marry, or that Harry consents to give me up, he must not return here. That is hard, is it not, Mr. Luttrell?—to separate Harry and his uncle, who has been like a father to him? My darling boy will never give me up, I know that, but I cannot be his ruin—I, who hoped to ; for it will be ruin if this

quarrel between him and his uncle continues. Mr. Walbrooke candidly told me that he would never forgive Harry's marrying against his consent. He said, 'My nephew must marry a woman of some social weight, to lift him up, instead of dragging him down.' It sounds worldly and heartless to me, Mr. Luttrell, but perhaps it is true, for all that. If I only knew what was right. If I only knew what was best for my darling!"

The sad eyes were full of tears, but they did not fall.

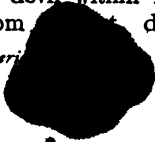
"Will you write to me, dear Miss Fleming?" I asked, with as steady a voice as I could command. "I think you know that I am your true friend, as I am Harry's, and that I shall always give you such advice as I should to a dear sister. My last word is, 'Do nothing rashly.'"

She promised to write, and thanked me warmly; then we parted. Nothing could be kinder than Mr. Walbrooke's farewell. "You must come to us again in June, Luttrell, whether Harry is here or not—whether he is here or *not*," he repeated, doggedly. "The young man's obstinacy is such that unless circumstances occur—which I am hopeful they may—to force him into submission, it is very probable he may continue to put himself into opposition to me. And as long as he does so, he will not come to the Grange. But, remember, we shall be very glad to see you. There is that Sir Joshua, you know, which you have begun to copy—you must return to finish it."

But the copy of Sir Joshua remains unfinished to this day; and, possibly, still adorns some attic at the Grange. I have never seen it or the Grange since that January morning in 1827.



CHAPTER VII.

My poor father's was a long illness, and I was constantly in attendance on him for many weeks. He died in March, and about the same time I learnt, indirectly, that Mr. Fleming was dead, leaving a widow and four children in very poor circumstances. I had received one or two letters from Assunta, giving a sad account of her tormented state of mind, Harry's name being now tabooed in the family circle, all communications between him and the Squire being of the briefest and driest character, and Mr. Ridgway being now a more constant guest than ever. Then came an interval when I heard nothing from the Grange, being myself too busily and painfully occupied to write more than the brief announcement of my father's death. I had only one letter from Harry, and that was not very satisfactory. It was, indeed, fuller than ever of his passionate attachment to Assunta; but of this I needed no assurance. I should have been better pleased to learn that it was producing some permanent effect on his life and character; but as to the one he was silent, and that the reckless impetuosity of the other was uncontrolled as ever was clear from the violent terms in which he wrote of his uncle. I had, moreover, the opportunity of learning through a friend, whose brother was at Oxford, that young Walbrooke's efforts at steadiness were spasmodic at best. He belonged to a fast set, and though he sometimes absented himself from their "wines" for a few days, the least vexation, or, it might be, the devil within him, unaided by any circumstances from  drove him to those festive

boards, from which he was too often seen reeling home in the early morning light.

All this was painful enough to me, and doubly so, as I did not see any hopeful termination to the existing state of things. In April I wrote to Assunta, but of course abstained from any allusion to what I had heard of Harry. I wrote but a few lines, asking for news of her; and some days later I received the following reply:—

"April 20th, 1827.

"DEAR MR. LUTTRELL,—

"THANK you for your kind letter. We have both had a heavy sorrow since I last wrote to you; added to which I have suffered much in other ways. You ask me to tell you everything about myself, or I should not think of intruding my own troubles upon you so soon. Dear Mr. Luttrell, there are griefs far worse than the death of those we love. Henry's conduct is driving me to despair. He has been sent away from Oxford—'rusticated' I think they call it—for a time, in consequence of some wild outbreaks. What will become of him? The doors of this house, his natural home, are shut against him; he will not go to Lady Horton's, who, it seems, spoke disparagingly of me when he was there in the winter. Alas! you see, on every side, I am the barrier between him and his relations; and Mr. Walbrooke's great kindness to me makes it all the worse. He has given me fifty pounds to send to poor dear Mrs. Fleming, and has promised to pay for little Charlie's schooling. Why cannot he rest satisfied with these acts of true benevolence, without trying to force me into a marriage with one man, while my heart is another's? Dear Mr. Luttrell, I have been

so torn asunder by conflicting feelings during the past week, that I scarcely know how I have arrived at the resolution I have formed to leave the Grange, which has been my home for the last five years; to bid it good-bye, probably for ever! A simple stratagem will enable me to do this without proclaiming my real motive. Mrs. Fleming is left in so forlorn and piteous a condition, with her four little children, that it appears natural I should go to her, though I fear that, in point of fact, I shall be more of a burden than a help, and must soon seek another situation. But I shall be no longer in the way here; I know they would never send me from them; but when I am gone, dear Harry can return, and all will then be well, I hope, between him and the squire. I will not tell you what it has cost me to come to this resolve. I know it is *right*, and that is my only consolation. The alternative was one I could not bring myself to accept. I have said nothing as yet about my plan; I dread all discussion so much, I must speak and act almost simultaneously, for I feel that Mr. Walbrooke will strenuously oppose my going. I cannot bring myself yet to think that all must be at an end between Harry and me; but oh! Mr. Luttrell, if my love should be doing him harm, instead of good! That thought haunts me. I was arrogant enough to hope that I stood between him and much evil. Alas! it is not so; I can deceive myself no longer; God knows what I ought to do; and yet, when I pray for guidance, I seem to get no answer to my prayers. Forgive this,

“From yours,

“Ever sincerely and gratefully,

“ASSUNTA FLEMING.”

As I pondered over this letter, I could not but feel that she was right. That her presence at the Grange should prevent Harry's return there, was clearly not defensible, not even politic. When she was really gone, when they had lost the charm of her gracious presence, they would, perhaps, understand her true worth better, and feel how inexpressibly lucky Harry was to have gained the heart of such a woman. They, or rather the squire, for Mrs. Walbrooke was of no account in the calculation, might gradually be brought to see that Harry's real welfare was dependent on this marriage. It was of importance that he should be at the Grange now, out of the reach of temptations to which he was constantly falling a prey, in his present condition of passionate, irritable, unsatisfied love. I believed that, on the whole, Assunta's resolution was wise, with a view to the ultimate happiness of both.

That same afternoon, as I was painting, and wondering what had become of Harry, he walked in, looking, to my surprise, in better spirits than I could have expected; but such was the quicksilver of his nature; to rise—and fall as rapidly—with the varying temperature of his hopes. I saw at once that he did not know of Assunta's leaving the Grange.

"I have been too down in the mouth, lately, to write to you, Geoff; but you'll forgive me, eh? I am sent from Oxford for the remainder of this term, for being in a row; but we won't talk about disagreeable things. Don't look so grave—I couldn't help it—I couldn't, indeed. And good comes out of evil sometimes. I have got a stroke of luck which will make me independent of the Squire, I hope, and then I can marry Assunta to-morrow."

He rubbed his hands with a boyish glee, and his whole face beamed.

"Independent of your uncle!" I repeated. "What do you mean? How on earth can good come of the evil of disgracing yourself at Oxford?"

"Well, in this way, Geoff. The fellow with whom I got into this row—indeed, I might say, who got me into this row, and who was leaving Oxford this term, so he didn't care for himself—is the son of a Scotch wine merchant in the City. He is a thundering good fellow, and when he heard me say that I couldn't go to the Grange, he insisted on my coming to stay at his father's here in London. On our way up I told him something of my position, and said I would do anything in the world that would give me a small, certain independence. He came to me last night, and said he had been talking to his father, who offered to take me into the house, and give me three hundred a year. My work would be chiefly to *tout*—to go among my friends, and try to get orders. I was a little staggered at first. It isn't the kind of thing I've been used to, but——"

"I should think not! And for a wine merchant, too! the last trade of all others, Harry, you should have anything to do with. You are ill-fitted in every way for this kind of life. I hope you will not think of it."

"Indeed, but I do, though. I have made up my mind to accept Mr. Strahan's offer. There's no disgrace in 'touting' Geoff?"

"I don't say that there is any disgrace, but I know that your uncle would never forgive you. It would be the most suicidal step you could take; and when I say

that, Harry, I mean something more than as regards your worldly prospects. You know your own fatal tendency: you will be constantly exposed to the temptation of 'tasting' wines, and not even Assunta's influence, I fear, will counterbalance this."

"I know myself better than you do, Geoff," he said, colouring. "I don't drink when I am happy. I drink when I am dispirited—I drink from a craving for excitement—to drown thought. When I have my darling for my own, when no one can separate us, I shall want nothing else, neither drink nor any other excitement."

I brought forward every argument I could, to move him from his purpose; and a great many bad ones among the number: to wit, that Mr. Strahan only wanted Harry's name to widen, and, it might be, to raise the Strahan connexion: that this was not honest work, which I always respected, but the base letting out on hire of a social influence to advance the interests of a trade. To which, of course, the rejoinder was, that Mr. Strahan's motives were nothing to Harry; and that as long as he could honestly recommend the wine, he saw no reason why he should not do so as generally as possible. Then I pointed out that it was impossible he could support a wife upon three hundred a year.

"I have a hundred and fifty of my own," he replied, "if my uncle were to take from me every farthing; which, for Assunta's sake, I hardly think he would do."

In short, he was so full of the scheme that nothing I could say made the smallest impression. Poor boy! His exhilaration lasted but a few hours. The day but one after this he rushed into my room, early in the

morning, with a letter in his hand. He was pale with excitement, his passionate nostrils dilated, his lips quivering. He neither shook my hand nor spoke a word of greeting; he only held out the letter, and said in a hoarse voice:

"Read that!"

I saw at once that it was from Assunta; but I was far from guessing its contents. Here is the letter itself, which fell into my hands years after. The paper is yellow; the ink is faded, but the pure and noble spirit breathes through it fresh as when those words were written:—

"April 22nd, 1829.

"MY OWN DEAREST HARRY,—

"I SIT down with a sorrowful heart, knowing that what I have to write will give you great pain. Ever since we parted, Harry, nearly four months ago, there has been a conflict in me, between my own selfish love, and a growing fear—a growing belief, that it was best for you that all between us should be at an end. If I could think, as I once did, that by ever being your wife I should do you more good than I could bring you harm, nothing should have shaken me. But, alas! dearest Harry, I have been shaken. I do not reproach you; I would not willingly add one pang to your sorrow, dear. I know that women cannot judge of men's temptations. All I mean is, that the existing state of things seems to be doing you injury in all ways, as regards your family, as regards your career, as regards your own self, which is far worse than all. I have not the power to guard you from this last evil, which would be my only justification for

severing you from your home, and for allowing you to sacrifice all your worldly prospects. Your uncle, whose character you scarcely understand as well as I do, in spite of all his great kindness to me, will *never* be reconciled to our marriage. Your youth would be wasted in pursuit of a dream, if you waited for his consent; if we married without it, Mr. Walbrooke would disinherit you at once. He has told me this himself. It would be mere sentimentality to pretend that such would not be a great misfortune to one bred up as you have been. But, as regards myself, there might be a yet worse misfortune. If you should not have strength to support poverty, Harry; if it should happen that, in order to drown your cares, you lowered morally, under my eyes, day by day; if the time ever came when I felt that you reproached me, in your heart, with being the cause of your degradation—I think I should kill myself. I could never survive the agony of such a thought as that. And therefore, dearest, I have been brought, with many bitter tears, to believe that everything between us had best be—I will not say *forgotten*, perhaps that is impossible, but, at an end. I am leaving this house, which has been my home for five years, to-morrow morning. You must not think I am driven away. Mr. Walbrooke has opposed my departure by every means in his power; but my eyes have been opened to see what is right. When I am gone, you will return to your natural home; for you must let no foolish resentment now prevent a reconciliation with your uncle. Oh! my darling, do not think too harshly of me for breaking my word; you would not, if you knew all I had suffered. This is the last time I shall ever write to you, and there is

something still at my heart which I would add. It is this. Although we are parted for ever in this world, I shall be comparatively happy in my obscurity if I hear of you as beloved and respected. I shall glory in your honour, dearest Harry. I shall die in your shame.

“ASSUNTA.

“P.S.—I am going to poor Mrs. Fleming. She has moved into the country.”

I had walked to the window to read this letter, and I remained there, with my back to Harry, unable to speak for some minutes after I had finished and re-folded it. Noble heart! What would I not have given for such love! Was it all to be wasted? I felt more bitter towards Harry at that moment than I had ever done before.

It was he who broke silence at last.

“They have driven her to it, Geoff, and, by Heaven, I'll never forgive them.”

“And you, Harry? Have you only reproaches for others, and none for yourself?”

“Can't you see, man,” he rejoined fiercely, “that I'm half mad with remorse without my saying so? But it isn't that. Though she thinks me such a reprobate, she would never have given me up (she hasn't now, in her heart) if they hadn't persuaded her it was for my good. But they will find themselves mistaken. She may write what she likes; I shall never give her up. And I'll be hanged if I go back to the Grange.”

“What do you mean to do, then?”

“Go in for the wine business. I'm more determined

than ever now. I shall cut Oxford, and am going to write to the Squire to tell him so."

"You will only grieve Assunta by doing all this, Harry."

"I can't help it, Geoff; it is his doing. I'll be independent somehow, I'm resolved; and so my darling girl shall know. What do I care for his money compared with her? I shall tell her that nothing she can say makes any difference. She is mine, and I am hers, until she marries another man—and the Squire may leave his property to whom he likes."

All argument was useless; I went over the old ground again and again, but to no purpose; he was resolutely set against "cringing" to the Squire, as he called it, and declared that he couldn't sit at meat with him, feeling as he did at present. Had he known where to find Assunta, I believe he would have set off that night. As it was, he wrote to her, directing his letter to the Grange, to be forwarded; and he wrote likewise to his uncle.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WEEK and then a fortnight passed, without any other letter from Assunta. Mr. Walbrooke had written twice, in a calm and forbearing manner considering the provocations he received, and had invited Harry to the Grange; but this had only elicited a flat refusal. The poor fellow was now under the impression that his letter to Assunta had never been forwarded, but destroyed by his uncle, and he tried in vain, through various channels, to learn her address. It was clear to

me that she herself had taken every precaution to prevent his tracing her; but he would not see it in this light. I then wrote to her myself, begging her to let me have a line—if she had bound herself by any promise not to write again to Harry—to say if she had received his letter. This I thought it best to enclose to Mr. Walbrooke (who knew of my correspondence with Assunta), begging him to forward it to Miss Fleming. I received a few lines from him, replying that he had done as I requested, feeling sure that I had Harry's interests too much at heart to plead for this insane boy with the young lady, who, having as much good sense as right feeling, had resolved to break off all communication with him. And, in the course of another week, I heard from Assunta herself. The note was without date; short and sad enough, though there was a very evident effort to make it appear otherwise. She had received Harry's letter. She could not write to him; perhaps it was better that she should not write to any one much just at present. She grieved to hear from Mr. Walbrooke that Harry refused to go to the Grange. The thing that would make her happiest now was to know of a complete reconciliation between him and his uncle. As to his entering the wine trade, perhaps she had no longer any right to express an opinion, or offer her advice, but she could not help begging him to pause before he took a step which she dreaded might prove prejudicial to him in all ways. She was very busy, and constant occupation was, no doubt, the best thing for her. She hoped that Harry would not try and track her to her present home, as it would only distress her to no purpose.

I read this, as it was plainly meant I should, to

him whom it chiefly concerned. The only effect it produced was to inflame him yet further against his uncle. The poor boy alternated now between fits of profound depression and storms of passion, which, while they lasted, rendered him absolutely ungovernable. And yet, to my surprise, I found that he made efforts of which I believe no one who has not that thirst in the blood can estimate the cost, to subdue the wild craving for drink which seized him whenever he felt especially wretched. So far as I know, for more than two months, he never once exceeded, and this first led me to hope, with a certain amount of confidence, that, under favourable circumstances, my poor friend might yet overcome his fatal tendencies. He was now, nominally, in Mr. Strahan's house; and had he been required to do desk work, he might perhaps have applied himself; but for the particular duty required of him—that of going up and down the world preaching the faith in Strahan's sherry—he was at present wholly unfit; and his employer must have found him an unprofitable servant. His thoughts were never absent from one subject; he wandered through the streets, looking gloomy or ferocious, as he was in the humour, and if he met a friend, and tried to blow Strahan's trumpet in a few minor chords, the effect was only to make the man hurry away, muttering, "Good Heavens! How changed that fellow is! He was the jolliest chap I ever knew at Trinity." The advocacy of gay, jovial Harry Walbrooke would have met with eminent success, as I doubt not the astute wine-merchant had calculated; but this same youth, transformed into a sad, stern man, proved but an indifferent huckster of the wares he was paid to dispose of. The only satisfac-

tion which Harry got out of the business was, I am afraid, the knowledge that he was doing something eminently annoying to his uncle. No communication had passed between them for some weeks. Lena wrote, much to our surprise, that Mr. Walbrooke was absent from home; he had not been away half a dozen times in the last ten years. I had a latent apprehension that he had gone to resuscitate his interest, to Harry's detriment, in some long-neglected nephews in the north. But it was not so.

One evening in June—I remember it as if it were yesterday—I sat alone at my open window. In the distance there was the roar of the mighty city, lessening hour by hour. Above me the broad arms of night raised themselves to embrace the few gold-haired children of the sky who yet lingered there. And evoked by that image of the end which comes to hush and darken all, in my heart arose the oft-recurring question, How shall it be after this life is ended? Will there be a dawn where the love, the fidelity, which remain unknown till darkness comes to swallow the loving and unloved alike, shall blossom and bear fruit? Such questions trouble me no more, thank God, for the time is now near at hand when I shall know all.

I was interrupted by the entrance of the maid-servant, who announced a gentleman, and I recognised in the twilight Mr. Walbrooke.

"I am in London for only a few hours," he began, "and as all communication between my hopeful nephew and myself is at an end for the present, I wish you to give him a piece of intelligence, Luttrell. Miss Fleming is to be married to Mr. Ridgway, of Hapsbury, next week. This, I hope, will bring him to his senses."

"God help him!" I groaned. "Oh, Mr. Walbrooke, may you never have reason to repent this bitterly!"

The Squire gave me a look of offended surprise. "Why so, pray? Not on Harry's account, I conclude? Nothing but this would cure him of his folly. He himself wrote to me as much. And as to Miss Fleming——"

"She will be miserable!" I interrupted, with a vehemence which must have contrasted strangely in the Squire's ears with my usually mild utterances. "She has consented to this self-sacrifice from a mistaken sense of her duty to Harry—and to you, Mr. Walbrooke, and perhaps also, to Mrs. Fleming, who is in great poverty."

"Mrs. Fleming did, I am glad to say, second me very strongly, and therein showed her good sense," said the Squire, with a dogged sententiousness. "It would have been flying in the face of Providence for a girl in Miss Fleming's position to persist in rejecting an offer of such exceptional brilliancy. She might wait long enough before she got such another."

"Better wait all her life—better wear her fingers to the bone! No blessing ever yet came upon a marriage where there was no love, and there is no love here upon either side."

"You have no right whatever to assume that," and a red spot rose upon the Squire's cheek. "Mr. Ridgway has, I am sure, a very sincere affection for the girl. In fact, he has proved it by his pertinacity. He has renewed his proposal three times."

"Yes," I cried, "because he thinks the world will condone his past offences when he is married, especially when married to so charming a creature."

"I am surprised that you should lend an ear to such miserable scandal," he rejoined; but there was more of annoyance than conviction in his tone.

"I don't lend an ear, in the sense of believing it, Mr. Walbrooke; but you cannot deny that it exists, nor can you, I suspect, deny that this is one of the chief causes of Mr. Ridgway's pertinacity; this, and the fact that his vanity would suffer at being rejected by a poor governess, after proclaiming his admiration so openly as he did."

"I don't say that that may not have something to do with it," said the Squire, with the air of a man who magnanimously concedes more than he need: "but I do say that Ridgway, with all his cleverness, and with such a fortune and place, might have married any one. Few dukes' daughters would have refused him; and I think it shows that he has a real—a—affection for Miss Fleming to have selected her."

"It only shows that he has that for which he has always been renowned, good taste. But I am not thinking of him, but of her, Mr. Walbrooke. Were he ever so much in love that would make no difference in the fact that her heart is entirely Harry's."

"Pshaw! All boys and girls who live in the same house fancy themselves in love. Harry happens to be more obstinate than most boys, that is all."

"So I am afraid you will find."

"He has chosen to become bagman to a wine merchant, with the intention of frightening me into concession, I suppose; but he will find himself mistaken. As long as he continues to disgrace my name I can have nothing to say to him; so you may tell him,

Luttrell. But this marriage will, I hope, open his eyes, and make him see the utter folly of his conduct."

I shook my head. "Is Miss Fleming's present residence still a secret, Mr. Walbrooke?"

"No; indeed, she asked me to beg you to go down and see her, if you were able, any day this week. They are living in a cottage near Waltham, where Mrs. Fleming's mother resides. You understand, of course, that this information is for you, not for Harry. I asked her whether she would wish to see him, and she said 'on no account.'"

The Squire shortly after this left me. I resolved not to tell Harry the fatal news until I had had an interview with Assunta; and, accordingly, the next morning saw me on the top of the coach, which started on its short journey at an early hour. I had no difficulty in finding Mrs. Fleming's humble dwelling, which was less a cottage than the dejected offshoot of a street, with a pretence at gentility, and a reality of hideous gloom. It stood at the end of a small wilderness of unfinished buildings of scarlet brick. The house itself was of the same material, with a bright green door, and brass knocker; it had no garden, no pleasant out-look, only the white dust of the road, and the hot glare of the surrounding houses. The door was opened to me by a little maid-of-all-work, of about fifteen, and she showed me into a room some twelve feet square, where sat Mrs. Fleming, Assunta, and three very red-faced children, at their early dinner. They were all in deep mourning, of course, and looked oppressed by the heat. The window was open, yet the room was, indeed, suffocating, partly owing to the fumes of an Irish stew, which hung about the dingy

curtains, and mud-coloured paper, and the six horse-hair chairs. It is puerile to dwell on these details, but I know they heightened the sense of discomfort, by the contrast with all I had hitherto seen Assunta surrounded by. She rose, held out her hand, and introduced me to Mrs. Fleming, a silly-looking woman, who had once been pretty, no doubt, but whose face now, with its little pointed red nose, was very unattractive. Sad it was, certainly; and sorrow generally interests me; but there was nothing sacred in the expression of this grief. It had taken sharp and querulous lines that played round the corners of the mouth; and she indulged in frequent "suspensions of the breath" in her flatulent discourse, which aggravated me. Assunta herself looked pale and worn. The children, two of whom were very young, were fed by her, and seemed to look to her, rather than to their mother, for everything, except constant scolding, wherein the poor lady evidently thought her maternal duty chiefly lay. When Assunta had given the children their rice pudding:

"I will now take Mr. Luttrell into the next room, dear mother," she said.

"As you please, my dear. Tommy, take your fingers out of your plate directly, and look what a mess you've made of your pinafore!"

I closed the door upon Mrs. Fleming's maternal strictures, and followed Assunta into the sitting-room on the opposite side of the passage, which was the counterpart of the parlour, except for the addition of a horse-hair sofa, and the substitution of a coloured for a white cloth upon the table, on which were a

Bible, a prayer-book, a work-basket, and some half-made frocks.

She sat down, and looked intently into my face. "How is Harry? How did he take the news?"

"He doesn't yet know it. I wanted to see you first. I wanted to know from your own lips that—that you had definitely made up your mind to this before I told him."

"I have definitely made up my mind," she said, in a low voice.

"And you have no misgiving? Forgive me for saying this, but if I may plead the privilege of an old friend——"

"You may, and I shall thank you; but I have weighed everything, dear Mr. Luttrell, and the result is—I have given my word to Mr. Ridgway. When I had once brought my mind to see that I must give up Harry, nothing that could happen to me signified much, and it seems to me the best thing for every one, except myself. If you knew all——" Here she sighed, and hesitated for a moment.

"I don't require to know all to be very sure that it cannot be right to sacrifice yourself thus."

"Oh, I had already done that," she said, shaking her head. "This is hardly to be called a sacrifice. I had certainly rather have worked for my daily bread if I had only had myself to think of; but I never disliked Mr. Ridgway, and he has behaved so nobly about poor Mrs. Fleming, that I feel deeply grateful to him. If my marrying him can make him happy——"

An impatient exclamation, I am afraid, burst from me, but I checked what I was about to say, and changed it to:

"Mr. Walbrooke, of course, it is who has brought this about? He was bent upon it from the very first."

"He would not have succeeded but for two things. First, Harry's insane letters to his uncle. I saw from them very plainly that he would continue to pursue this fatal scheme of his, and remain at open war with the Squire as long as I remained unmarried. He said so; and, on some points, he has all the Walbrooke tenacity of purpose. Ah, if he only had it in all!"

"He has been battling manfully with temptation during the past three months," I said.

"Has he?" she rejoined, eagerly. "How thankful I am."

"And the other thing?" I asked. "What was that?"

She was silent for a moment.

"Not even Mr. Walbrooke knows; but I will tell you. Poor Mr. Fleming died terribly in debt, far more so than we had any idea of at first. After everything was sold there was still a large deficit. Mr. Walbrooke was very kind, as you know, but what he gave me only went to relieve Mrs. Fleming's immediate necessities, and I could not have applied to him again. Of course you are aware that Mr. Fleming and his wife brought me up out of charity, that I am indebted to them for everything I have ever had? When Mr. Ridgway offered to settle four hundred a year upon my adopted mother, and she, poor soul! went down on her knees to implore me not to reject this maintenance for her, urging, very justly, that thus only could I repay all that her husband and she had done for me, how could I refuse? What possible means had I of extricating her from her troubles but this? I might get eighty or a

hundred a year as a governess, if I had great luck, and send her sixty or seventy out of it—that was the utmost I could look forward to doing for her and these penniless children. As I have already said, my sacrifice was made—to ratify it thus was not so hard, and it seemed to be my duty.”

“I can’t think so, and I can’t forgive Mrs. Fleming——” I began, warmly, when the door opened, and the widow entered, followed by her children. Assunta took up one of the frocks from the table, and Mrs. Fleming another, and both began stitching assiduously.

“I suppose Assunta has told yon all about her prospects?” said the widow. “It is the most wonderful piece of luck, as Mr. Walbrooke says. If poor Mr. Fleming could only have lived to see it! Ah, dear! (Sammy, leave that thimble alone.) Yes, when I think of the day we found her, nearly twenty-one years ago now (Jane, will you sit still, once for all?), I little thought she would live to be a great lady—the sickliest-looking baby I ever saw—a great contrast to all mine, even the three I lost; ah, dear! they weren’t so puny. I have had plenty of trouble, Mr. Luttrell. Some people are born to trouble, just as others are born to luck, like Assunta. To be left with four children, as I am! Ah, dear!”

I felt that I could not talk to this woman, and turned to ask Assunta where she was to be married. Mrs. Fleming answered for her.

“Here, I am sorry to say. Mr. Walbrooke asked us to go to the Grange for it, which would have been much nicer, but Assunta wouldn’t. She didn’t consult my feelings, nor how poor Mr. Fleming would have

felt, had he been alive, at having to receive Mr. Ridgway in such a house as this. (Tommy, get down off that chair this minute, sir. My dear, reach me your scissors.) No, it is very humiliating, after being accustomed to one's own plate as I always have, and such beautiful table-linen, for poor Mr. Fleming liked everything nice, and such books as he had; all sold, with every stick of furniture in the house (Jane, if you can't sit still you must go out of the room), and then to come down to pewter, with Mr. Ridgway's elegance, too. Ah, dear, dear!"

"There is no disgrace in poverty, mother, and Mr. Ridgway is too truly a gentleman for you to worry about such things."

Still Mrs. Fleming ran on for another half-hour a Jeremiad over her various losses; her husband, her own health, and her piano, her Brussels carpets, her three dead children, and her Worcester china, all very much in the same tone, interspersed with sundry moral fillips to Tommy, Jane, and Sammy, as irritating to the tempers of those poor little animals as the constant twitches of a heavy-handed driver are to his horses' mouths. And Assunta—what a life must hers have been during these past three months! What a sore addition to her other trials, the blister of this foolish woman's tongue!

By-and-by I looked at my watch, and seeing that it wanted but a quarter of an hour to the time when the coach was to start, I made bold to ask if Assunta would walk part of the way to the inn with me; for it was my only chance of getting another word alone with her. She ran and put on her bonnet.

As soon as we were in the street, "You will understand, I am sure," she said, "why I couldn't go to the

Grange. Poor Mrs. Fleming thinks it is my pride, and I cannot undeceive her. There are two things I have not strength and courage for—to revisit the place where I was so exquisitely happy, and to see Harry again.”

“Have you any message to him?” I asked, after a pause.

“Tell him not to think too hardly of me, that is all. What I have done has been because I believed it to be for his good.”

“I hope it may prove so, but I doubt it. I should not be a friend to you both if I withheld from you my belief that you are utterly wrong. I see the force of all your arguments for this marriage, but you cannot make black white. And Harry will not see it as white: don't deceive yourself.”

We were crossing one of the streams that intersect the town. She stopped for a minute, as if transfixed by some agonizing thought, and leaned on the little wooden parapet of the bridge, looking over into the water, so that I could not see her face. Presently she raised it and said:

“He is young, he will get over his grief; and by-and-by, in the course of time, he will find some woman who loves him nearly as well, perhaps, as I do, and whom he can love, and whose influence over him is greater than mine has been. In the meantime, Mr. Luttrell, there will be this immediate good. He and his uncle will be reconciled.”

I thought differently; but it would have been cruel to harass her mind further by raising doubts on this point. She had resolved to immolate herself. I felt myself powerless to prevent the consummation of this

mistaken self-sacrifice, and having once spoken, what right had I to add to her misery, poor child! by painful and fruitless discussion?

I heard the guard wind his horn: and taking her hand within mine, I murmured:

"May it all turn out as you expect. God bless you! Mr. Ridgway has bought a pearl of great price, if he knows how to value it. May you at least find peace in your new home!"

And so we parted on that little bridge; and I left behind me the brightest, the best, the dearest vision of my youth. When we next met, that vision had become a sad reality among the stern, hard truths of middle life.

CHAPTER IX.

THE course of events during the next four years may be briefly told. As regards my life, and those with which it had hitherto been so closely bound, circumstances had separated us completely. Harry Walbrooke and I scarcely ever met now; and yet he was master of the Grange. The Squire was dead; Mrs. Walbrooke and Lena were abroad; and as I never heard from Mrs. Ridgway of Hapsbury, I did not venture to write to her. Thus the links were all severed, and the little I knew of those who had been and were still so dear to me, was by rumour, some faint echo of which penetrated even to my solitude.

The fact is, my poor friend's course was a downward one from the time Assunta married. He became utterly reckless, and led a life of dissipation during the

few months he remained with Mr. Strahan, after the morning when I broke the fatal news to him, which divided us further every day. His associates were very distasteful to me; but I would not have shrunk from them, if my joining the parties to which he constantly invited me would have done him any good; but it would not; and as I had to work very hard for my bread at that time, the interruption of labour would have been serious. Then followed that gradual slackening of intimacy which is inevitable when the tenour of one man's life is a silent protest against his friend's. Between him and his uncle the feud remained unhealed, and he never saw the Squire again alive. Mr. Walbrooke, who might be said to be still in the prime of life, and whose obstinacy—not to speak of his affection—would have suffered keenly in disinheriting Harry, and so owning himself worsted in the long-sustained contest with his favourite nephew, delayed altering his will from week to week, in the hope that speedy ruin might bring the wretched boy to seek forgiveness. The strong man, in his pride, had no thought of being dispossessed; but one stronger than he came suddenly into his house by night, and in the morning Squire Walbrooke of the Grange lay dead. By a will, dated five years before, all his landed estates passed to Harry, charged with a large jointure to Mrs. Walbrooke, and a certain sum to Lena. And so it came to pass, that, in her bitter irony, Fortune cast this ill-deserved gift at Harry's feet—just nine months too late to save him from life-long ruin and misery. Ah, had Assunta but waited! How cruel it seemed!

The young Squire went down and took possession of the Grange, and his connection with Strahan's of

course ceased. But a number of so-called "friends," whom he had made in his short London career, followed him ere long, and every fast man from Oxford, and every needy sportsman in the country who wanted a good mount and cared for a good bottle of claret, found his way to the Grange. In such company I should have been very much out of place; these men and I had no one idea in common, and to witness their orgies, and to see foolish, generous-hearted Harry allowing his substance to be devoured by these vultures would have only made me angry. I refused all his pressing invitations. "If you ever are alone, and want me, I will come to you," I said, "but not when your army of swashbucklers is with you—don't ask me." And he did not, after a while. I heard of him, alas! from time to time, and what I heard was as bad as it could well be. The life at the Grange was a scandal to the whole county; it was said that there was scarcely a night that the young Squire went to bed sober, and even once in the hunting-field he had been in a condition which necessitated his being taken home. His uncle's old friends (particularly those who had marriageable daughters) bore with this state of things as long as it was possible; but when every effort to lure him into the decent, if dull, society of the neighbourhood proved abortive, they gave him up; it was felt to be impossible for steady old fathers of families to continue going to the Grange.

Harry and Assunta had never met, nor were they likely to do so, though living only twenty-five miles apart; inasmuch as Mrs. Ridgway, of Hapsbury, it was said, never went outside the park-gates, and within them the young Squire had, of course, never set foot.

His animosity against Mr. Ridgway was well known, and broke out on the mere mention of that gentleman's name into the bitterest scoffs; but of the lady he was never known to speak. Rumours of the life she led I suppose must have reached him; he must have heard of her through Lena, who corresponded with her friend from time to time. But these letters would have told him little of the truth, as he must have known; and it is certain that, from the moment he heard of her marriage, he ceased to try and hold any sort of communication with the object of his unhappy passion. Perhaps I was the only person in the world who guessed that he had not forgotten her; and that he vainly imagined the life of violent exercise and moral excess would act as a styptic to the wound which still bled when it was touched. Not that he ever spoke to me of her, even in the early days of wrath and bitterness; indeed, he expressly begged me never to allude to the past, or to anything that should remind him of his loss.

It only remains for me to add, before I take up the thread of my narrative again, that, in spite of constant and anxious endeavours to learn all I possibly could of Mrs. Ridgway, the information I gained was but meagre. Mr. Ridgway and his wife led a very secluded life. They had no children. Mrs. Ridgway was not supposed to be a happy woman; but very little seemed to be known about her. Mr. Ridgway discouraged intimacy with any neighbours. At certain stated intervals he received them all with sumptuous courtesy (I believe it would be a misuse of the word to call it hospitality); for, since his marriage, most of those who had kept aloof from him, had come for-

ward, and for the sake of the young wife were disposed to forget any sinister rumours regarding the husband. But it was as though he said, "Now that I have conquered these people, they shall see that I care nothing for their society. They receive me; they come to my house; it is enough." He declined all invitations. A few savants, dilettanti, and stray foreigners of various kinds, stayed at Hapsbury from time to time; and sometimes the magnates of those parts were bidden to meet them. This, as far as I could gather, was the only intercourse between Mr. and Mrs. Ridgway and their neighbours.

It chanced in the February of 1831 that I had occasion to make a journey to Peterborough on professional business. During my stay there, I learnt that the day coach from that city to York passed within a few miles of Hapsbury, which was not more than forty miles from Peterborough. My business concluded, I was in no special hurry to return home, and a temptation, which will sound strange to many, urged me, now I was so near, to go on to Hapsbury, or at least into its immediate vicinity, and learn what I could of my poor Assunta, even if I was unable to see her, for I had been given to understand that Mrs. Ridgway was generally denied to morning visitors. Acting upon this impulse, which I found irresistible, I took my place in the coach one morning, and was at the small town of L. early in the afternoon. From there, with a knapsack on my back, I walked over to the village of Hapsbury, some six miles distant. There had been a long drought, and the road was as deep in limestone dust as though it had been summer, the result of which was that my old painting-blouse and cap, my hair,

eyelashes, every part of my outward man, was thickly powdered over, and I resembled nothing so much as an indigent baker or bricklayer out of work. In fact, one charitably-minded old gentleman on a cob did actually throw me sixpence, for which I touched my cap, thinking it would only distress him, and check the stream of his benevolence towards the next wayfarer, if I explained his error. So much to account for the fact that when I entered the taproom of the little public at Hapsbury, and found three men over their pipes and beer, two of whom were unmistakably tramps, the third a boosy labourer, they viewed me without suspicion, and continued to discourse freely, as before one of their own caste. The tramps were bound for Nottingham, Hapsbury lying on the high road, I found, between that city and L——, which I had just left. The discussion, as I entered, was as to the relative excellence of various roads. At first I understood this to refer to their paving, which in some parts of the country is but bad walking. It was, however, as I soon learnt, the moral rather than the physical aspect of the king's highway, which the worthy couple had under consideration.

"Nottingham to Leicester's a betterer road nor this. I left ten crosses and three double crosses behind me the last time as I done that 'ere road," said one speaker, looking round with an air of satisfaction, not unmixed with pride.

"Besides dots?" asked the other.

"Besides dots. They're the softest 'earted lot you ever see. It's true that this 'ere way, there's one 'ouse as is always good for five crosses."

"What do that mean?" asked the boosy labourer, taking the pipe from his mouth, his leaden eye lighted up with a gleam of curiosity.

"Why, every cross is a tizzy, to be sure, and a tizzy's a sixpence, if you don't know," said the first speaker, with an air of profound contempt for bucolic ignorance.

"And what's dots?"

"Dots is brownies, as we call 'em sometimes, that's pence. We don't make much account hov a road as 'as got nothin' but dots along the palin's. Now this 'ere lady's one o' the right sort, poor thing. I s'pose she's kep' in a kind o' prison, for scores and scores o' times as I come this way, she's al'ays at that same winder, and she's always good for 'alf-a-crown. Indeed, for any chap as 'as a squaller——"

"What's a squaller?" said the rustic, resolved to satisfy his legitimate thirst for information, regardless of the traveller's scorn.

"Why, bless your 'eart, a squaller's a brat as squalls, to be sure. I might ha' bought Mary Hanne's squaller for ten bob, and wery good interest it'd ha' paid me for my money. This 'ere good lady al'ays gives five bob to a squaller, they tells me. I s'pose she's never a child of 'er own, eh?"

"Noa." Here the fellow scratched his head, and added, after a pause, "she's be a loanesome life, folks say; but the Squoire be foine and rich, any ways. Eh, but money be a foine thing."

"And be 'im as charitable as 'er?" asked the second tramp; and turning to his fellow labourer, he murmured something in a low voice, of which I only caught the

words, "distressed hoperatives." But the spark of cupidity, if kindled, was quickly extinguished.

"Noa, noa. You'll not be gettin' the blind side o' the Squoire. It be th' missis as be for the givin'. He be all for argyfy'ng; and when he lost his tri'le 'gain the village, 'bout th' path, he were that riled, he never give us nothin' no moure. They tells me as th' parson's tried to stan' up again him for t' argyfy, but it warn't no good; he wouldn't give a ha'porth to th' school along o' that 'ere path."

This was a dark saying to me, and as the conversation changed soon after, I took advantage of the landlord's entry to ask for a bedroom, and to order some dinner. But as I saw from his face that my appearance did not inspire him with much confidence (which was what I wanted, at that moment, more even than the bed or dinner), I followed him into the passage, and taking some money from my pocket, I showed it him, and said:

"Though I wear a shabby coat, I will pay my way—don't be afraid."

And upon mine host protesting that nothing was further from his thoughts, we drifted into an amicable discourse, which I led gradually to the subject of Squire Ridgway and "his lady." I learnt that the state of feeling between the Squire and his village was anything but pleasant, owing to a right of way across his park, which he had vainly endeavoured to stop up. This path led directly under the window of Mrs. Ridgway's boudoir, and was a poisoned thorn in the side of the exclusive "man of taste." Mine host was of opinion that to the pale, lonely lady, sitting for ever at her window, and debarred, by the existing feud, from even

visiting the poor, the sight of the labourer, plodding homewards after his day's work, of the rosy milkmaid, laden with the spoil of the heavy-uddered kine, of even the foot-sore tramp, trailing his weary steps through the cool grass, with a sense of thankfulness after the hot flinty road, were pleasant breaks in the monotony of her day, which she would have been sorry to lose. But however this might be, Mr. Ridgway, with that smooth implacability (which I knew so well), had never forgiven the obstinate resistance which the village had made to the infringement of their right. From that day Mr. Ridgway declined to do anything further for the poor, for the school, or for the church; he forbade his wife's going into the village; he cut off his establishment, as far as practicable, from all communication with his humbler neighbours, as he discouraged it with the richer ones, and all this he did deliberately, without heat, or visible expression of anger. The parish had tried conclusions with him, he said to the good vicar militant, who returned to the charge repeatedly; he, Mr. Ridgway, was a man of peace, and they had desired war; they had made their election—it was well; he had nothing more to say to them. And from this ultimatum nothing would move him.

What I had heard, both in the tap-room and from the landlord, gave me plenty to think of that night. I made up my mind that I would not leave the neighbourhood till I had seen and spoken to Assunta; but how was this to be managed? Mine host had given me to understand that, unless Mr. Ridgway was in the humour to receive company, the doors were shut against every visitor to his wife. I resolved to reconnoitre the ground before making any attempt, and early in the

forenoon of the following day I started to walk across the park by the public path in question. On approaching the stately Italian palace, with its sky-line of marble balustrade, broken by busts and urns, I pulled my cap further over my face, and, disguising my gait with a stoop and a limp, I crept slowly past the angle of the house, in which was the window which had been described to me. On the other side of the path was a broad sheet of water, upon which this window consequently looked, and just beyond it came the great portico and flight of steps. The gardens, terraces, and fountains were all on the other side of the house. I looked up at the window, there was no one to be seen; I lingered, I looked back, and then I turned and walked past it again. At last I bethought me of my sketch-book, and, taking it out, I turned my back to the house, and facing the water, with the chestnut-wood behind it, and the soft line of hills in the distance, I made a few random strokes, hoping that she I sought might be attracted presently to the window. I had not stood thus five minutes when I heard a step upon the gravel behind me, and, turning, I saw a powdered footman approaching. "It is all up now," I thought; "I am going to be warned that, though there is a right of way, there is no right of standing to sketch in front of the house." And I shut my book. Imagine my surprise when the servant thus addressed me:

"Mr. Ridgway has sent me to ask, sir, if your name is not Luttrell? If so, he hopes you will walk in."

I never felt more confused. Of course I acceded; but when I reflected upon my appearance, and remembered how I had limped and slouched, and that

the lynx-eyed master here had detected me from his window under this masquerade, I confess I was ashamed of meeting him. My only course was boldness, and a statement of such portion of the truth as I could tell. My conductor led me through the great hall, with its marble pavement, and busts of the Roman emperors along the walls, into a small morning-room, hung entirely with rare engravings in narrow black frames. A table, with a Sèvres chocolate service on it, stood near the fire, and before it, sipping his breakfast, in a black quilted satin dressing-gown, stood the master of the house. The window, through which he had seen me, was in front of him, as he stood with his back to the fire-place, and to his right was a door leading into the library. He looked as young as ever, and, with that silver-electro-plated smile of his, held out two fingers, saying:

"Ben venuto, Signor Pittore. By a curious coincidence you were in my thoughts five minutes before I saw you out of the window. What brings you to our fens? Not a study of the picturesque, I imagine?"

"I am on a short walking tour, having left my heavy luggage at L——. I was debating in my mind whether I could venture to present myself here, in this mendicant's guise, Mr. Ridgway, when——"

"Never mind, my dear sir. I hate explanations, don't you? They never explain anything. I am very glad to see you, no matter what may have brought you here—you are the very man I want. You have arrived very opportunely to give me a piece of advice; but, first, will you have some breakfast? There are lobster cutlets and pâté de foie gras," said he, taking up a slip of paper on the breakfast tray, and then added—

"Not that I often eat anything myself at this hour, but their existence is thus notified to me."

I said I had breakfasted three hours since; and then I asked for Mrs. Ridgway. She was well, he replied, and reverted at once to the subject which was evidently uppermost in his mind. He had purchased a ceiling, by Giulio Romano, out of a palace at Genoa, and it had lately arrived at Hapsbury. It had received some damage in the transit. Whether to have it retouched and varnished before it was put up, or wait to see the effect when it was up, and how much restoration would be needed, were points on which he wished for professional advice. My careful studies for years in our National Gallery, and the attention I had bestowed upon such subjects rendered me competent to give an opinion; and I followed Mr. Ridgway into the crimson saloon, where the canvas representing the Fall of Phaeton was stretched upon the floor. The result of the examination and discussion that ensued was all that I need here repeat. In my judgment, the less the picture was touched the better, and the very small amount of reparation requisite, I believed I could do myself, as well as, and without the risk of, its being subject to another journey to London. Mr. Ridgway was delighted; it was just what he wished, and I, of course, very gladly acceded to his invitation to remain at Hapsbury until the work was completed. A dog-cart was sent over to L—— for my things, and in the course of a couple of hours I found myself, to my astonishment, regularly installed in the house, to effect an entry into which, that morning, had seemed to me a matter of some difficulty. Still, I did not see its mistress. Mr. Ridgway remained with me, and con-

versed brilliantly, but he never alluded to his wife, and when at last I asked point blank if I might be allowed to pay my respects to Mrs. Ridgway, he only replied, "Oh, you will see her by-and-by." In the course of conversation I ventured to say that I heard he led a very secluded life, rarely admitting visitors.

"Are you surprised that I do not choose to be bored by all the idiots of a neighbourhood like this, where there is not a man who cares for anything but riding after a wretched little animal with a pack of hounds?" was his rejoinder. "I am glad to see any man of cultivation, otherwise I prefer my own society, and that of my books. In them I daily make acquaintances far pleasanter than any I find about here."

Not a word about his wife. I could not keep silence. "And Mrs. Ridgway. Does not she find it lonely without any society?"

"I do not understand any one but a fool feeling lonely," he said, in rather a freezing tone. "Mrs. Ridgway is a person of cultivation. She has her books and her music. The visits of a set of gossiping women could not—ought not—to be any pleasure to her. Silence is better for her than to listen to evil speaking, lying, and slandering, which is what the ladies of England indulge in during their morning visits."

After this it was clear to me that the gossip of the county was in some measure the cause (but in what way I could not then perceive) of the existing state of things at Hapsbury. Mr. Ridgway had gained all he had wanted; the county had flocked to his house; how could its idle tongues affect him now?

"Does Mrs. Ridgway take any interest in your poorer

neighbours?" I asked, presently, anxious to elicit something from my host on this head.

"I have been obliged to interdict all that sentimental visiting of cottages which has lately come into fashion among fine ladies," was his reply. "The poor here are an ignorant, obstinate race. I have washed my hands of them some time ago. Any pettifogging lawyer, or low radical parson, who will talk to them of their rights, can twist them round his finger. As Butler says:

And what they're confidently told,
By no sense else can be controll'd.

They were advised to resist me, and I hope they value the advice now," he added, with a smile. I said no more.

The day closed in, and the dressing-gong for dinner sounded. I hurried down to the Spanish drawing-room, that famed apartment hung with Cordova leather, and adorned with some of the master-pieces of Velasquez and Murillo, and there, as I had hoped, I found Assunta, and alone. But oh, how changed! Nothing remained of the Assunta whom I remembered but the eyes, and they were larger, more intense, than ever. Those burning orbs in their deep blue hollows, the shrunken cheek, the bloodless lips all gave me the impression of some inward fire consuming the frail lamp that held it. Her fingers seemed almost transparent, as I took the hand she extended, and pressed it respectfully to my lips. She was magnificently dressed in a velvet robe, trimmed with fur, after the fashion of that day, against which the yellow white of her face and hands came out in yet more ghastly contrast. She evidently knew of my being in the house, for she

manifested no surprise at seeing me; she was very calm, very silent; but a faint smile flickered on her face as I took her hand, and then it died out to reappear no more. As to myself, I could not speak. Though I had looked forward to this meeting so long, though I knew I should find her sadly changed, the sight of her affected me so painfully that I dared not trust my own voice. It was she who broke the silence.

"I am glad to see you again. I never expected to do so. It seems a long, long time since we met—much longer than it really is."

"I have so often wished to hear from you," I at last found voice to say.

"Ah, I never write to any one now!"

"Not even to Lena?"

"Not even to Lena."

"And why not? Why cut yourself off from all communication with friends who love you so truly?"

She paused a moment or two, deliberating, as it seemed to me, whether she should give the real reason. Then she said quietly:

"Because I have nothing to tell."

There was a chilling silence.

"And Mrs. Fleming and the children—do you never hear from them?"

"They write when they want anything, and Mr. Ridgway sends it."

She said this impassively, without a touch of bitterness, or even of regret. It was as though the springs of feeling were all frozen; and I saw that it would take long to thaw them. Mr. Ridgway entered, his well-turned legs displayed in small-clothes and silk stockings, which were then still worn by a few men; fra-

grant, and polished as ivory and ebony from head to foot. I fancied that he gave a quick, penetrating glance at Assunta; but he came forward without any embarrassment of manner, and from that moment to the hour of our retiring to rest, he kept up a constant fire of anecdote and quotation, happily needing but little assistance from me. He never addressed his wife, except to ask what she would take (those were the good old days of carving at table), and unless I spoke to her she remained absolutely silent. I appealed to her for an opinion whenever it was possible, in the hope of drawing her gradually into the conversation, but it was in vain; she sat there like a figure carved in stone, that by some mechanism is made to utter a monosyllable from time to time, and that is all. Nothing that was said awoke a smile, or any sign of interest on her face; and as soon as the dessert was set upon the table, she rose slowly and left the room. We sat late over our wine, for my host showed no inclination to leave his claret till the bottle was finished, and I, who ~~was~~ impatient to return to Assunta, could not of course suggest a move. We found her sitting by the fire. I can see her now, the ruddy light upon her velvet dress, a fan of peacock's feathers in her hand, and the golden gloom of the Spanish leather background and richly carved frames. She did not turn her head, she did not move. There was something very terrible in this apathy. When the clock struck half-past ten she got up and took a small Roman lamp from the table. Then she held out her hand and turned towards the door. Mr. Ridgway gracefully sauntered up, and held it open for his wife.

"Good-night, Assunta."

"Good-night."

There was no kiss, no touch of any kind. She looked neither to the right nor to the left, but passed out, and the door closed behind her.

As soon as we were alone I observed a change in Mr. Ridgway. He was silent for certainly two or three minutes, passing his white hand to and fro across his chin, as he stared into the fire. Suddenly he looked up into my face, and with an expression upon his own so complicated that I found it impossible to read it, he said:

"You have not seen Mrs. Ridgway for some time. How do you think her looking?"

"Very ill. Sadly changed, if you ask me, Mr. Ridgway."

"Did she say anything to you before dinner?—before I came into the room?"

I returned his gaze steadily. "Very little."

"You observe that she is generally taciturn. But at times this is not the case. You are right, she is ill, Mr. Luttrell, and her malady is one which I fear is incurable. You are an old friend of hers, and you are now my guest for the next week at least. It is possible that in the course of that time Mrs. Ridgway may speak to you in a manner which renders it advisable that you should be prepared to receive what she says by a knowledge of her condition. Her mind has lost its balance, and at moments she may be said to be absolutely insane."

I was speechless with horror and indignation. I did not believe what he said, though it at once flashed through my mind how plausible the tale might be made to look. I felt, however, the absolute necessity of

mastering my emotion and concealing my real sentiments, if I wished to be of service to my unhappy friend; and, fortunately I had sufficient self-command to let my face betray nothing. After a moment's pause, he continued:

"She has happily never needed restraint. She is free to do what she likes, subject to certain restrictions, especially in the matter of receiving visitors alone. Her hallucinations have been such, and her speech so wild at times, that some precaution of this kind was necessary. But the servants have no idea of the truth. It is looked upon as my eccentricity."

"What medical advice have you had?" I asked.

"Doctor L. came from London expressly, when my suspicions were first aroused. He said the case was not an uncommon one of monomania. He held out very little hope of recovery, but said that her state might continue like this for years."

Here was chapter and verse. I was a little staggered; but I knew a brother of Doctor L.'s, and I resolved to test, at all events, the truth of his alleged visit. I said presently: "Did Doctor L. think a life of such absolute seclusion good for a person in this sad condition?"

"She must, above all, be subjected to no excitement. I have occasionally a friend or two to stay with me, when she is generally much as you saw her to-night. The last large party I had was about a year ago. I found it did her more harm than good. She talked very wildly to one of the ladies, who happened to name that wretched sot, young Walbrooke. After that, I determined to have no more parties."

"Have you ever communicated with her—her friends?"

"She has no *family*, as you know. Mrs. Walbrooke has been abroad for the last three years. I wrote to that poor creature Mrs. Fleming, to say that Assunta was in a highly nervous state, and unable to see her, and that, I thought, was sufficient. A woman like Mrs. Fleming would do her infinitely more harm than good."

"I fear, from your report," I said, dryly, "that nothing can do Mrs. Ridgway any good. On what subject, may I ask, do you consider that she is a monomaniac?"

"Chiefly on the subject of myself; but everything relating to the past, to the time when she lived at the Grange, is sure to excite her. As your acquaintance with Mrs. Ridgway belongs to that date, Mr. Luttrell, I hope you will be cautious, in any intercourse you may have with her, not to refer to that time. I may rely on you?"

"Mr. Ridgway, you may rely on my doing nothing to injure my poor friend, in whose sad case I feel the deepest interest."

He talked for some time longer on the same topic, and in the same strain. There was no affectation of deep feeling; it was the dispassionate tone of a philosopher, who does his best, under existing circumstances, and has made up his mind to every eventuality. And then we parted for the night. To me, I need hardly say, it was a sleepless one. So wretched an evening as that I had never passed. I lay awake, revolving in my mind how I might arrive at the truth in this affair, and, if it were possible, help this dear, unhappy lady. And in the morning I wrote (and posted with my own hand) the following note:

"Hapsbury, Lincolnshire, March 5th.

"DEAR L.,—Do me a great favour. Ask your brother whether he came down to the above address, eighteen months ago, to give an opinion on Mrs. Ridgway's case, and (if it be no breach of professional etiquette) what did he consider her ailment to be at that time? You will confer a lasting obligation on me if you can send me answers to these questions by return of post.

"Yours, ever most faithfully,

"GEOFFREY LUTTRELL."

CHAPTER X.

As the morning wore on, I resolved to obtain an interview with Assunta; but how was this to be accomplished? Was it true that she was free? that this seclusion in her boudoir was voluntary? She did not appear at breakfast; I saw no sign of her about the house. If the maids in attendance upon her were spies, I must guard against arousing their suspicions. Mr. Ridgway was busy in his study with his translation of Horace's Odes, which he had talked of to me all breakfast-time, pointing out the difficulties of the task, and by what happy turns he had paraphrased the poet's verse in places. I was at my work in the crimson saloon, the windows of which overlooked the terraces and fountains at the back of the house. I listened to every footfall on the gravel, but only a gardener or two passed that way. Towards noon, I took up my hat, and strolled out. I passed her boudoir window; she was not there. I sauntered down

to the water's edge, and watched the wild fowl stringing pearls along the surface of the lake; and then I turned, and made my way through a wire wicket into the great gardens at the other side of the house. I had traversed all the broad alleys, and was speculating on the small amount of pleasure this stately place could afford to its owner or his unhappy wife, when, on crossing a walk narrower than the rest, and screened by a thick yew-hedge from the house, I saw her whom I had despaired of finding, seated at the further end, as motionless as the Greek nymph with her urn on its pedestal above her. She raised her eyes as I approached, that was all. The hands lay listless on the long, stone-coloured cloak, which covered her to the very ground; the very outline of the broad-leafed hat was unchanged, against the background of dark yews; her eyes were just lifted to mine, no more.

"I am so glad to find you," I began. "I feared you were going to remain in your room, as you did all yesterday, and that I should not have a moment's conversation alone with you."

"I come here twice every day," she replied, quietly.

"I think this is not so pretty as some other parts of the garden," I observed, by way of saying something. My great object was to get her to talk, and this, I feared, would be difficult. She was silent for some minutes. Then, as if she felt she must say something, she said:

"I come here to watch a blackbirds' nest in that laurel-bush. I saw them begin and finish it, and now I watch the mother-bird sitting."

"Ah! I see her. Have you many birds about here?"

"I don't know—yes, I suppose so."

"And any pets of your own?"

"No. The less one loves,—the less there is to lose."

"Yet you take an interest in these birds?"

"It is the mother's loving care of her little ones I come here to watch. Oh! if I had but a little one of my own!" she exclaimed, with a sudden passion, "I could bear anything—anything. But the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. My own mother abandoned me. I clung to nothing, and nothing will ever cling to me. I shall go out of the world, a waif, as I came, leaving nothing behind me!"

"You are too young to talk thus. While there is life there is——"

"Not hope! No, there is no hope for me but when this life is ended. Would to God it might end to-night!" She had worked herself up into a state of excitement, and spoke rapidly. "Mr. Ridgway thinks I am mad, perhaps I am. I know I have said things I should not; if I talked I might be tempted to say them again. That is why I am dumb, as you see me. If I should ever talk to you about—about him, don't believe what I say. I have been the ruin of one already, in my short life; I will not be his ruin, too, God help me!" Then suddenly dropping her voice to a low tremulous tone, "Mr. Luttrell," she added, "have you seen Harry lately?"

I dreaded to touch upon that theme. "No; I see none of them now. My links with the Grange are all snapped. But in memory of that good time that is

past," I went on rapidly, "will you treat me as a true friend, and tell me if there is any way in which I can serve you? The opportunities of my seeing you alone, while I am here, may be few, therefore I seize this moment to say what is on my mind. I am doing what nothing can scarcely ever justify, but the circumstances of your case are peculiar, and you have just alluded to them in terms which I cannot misunderstand. You are unhappy. Is there anything in your position which you would have altered—which the intervention of friends might improve in any way?"

She looked at me with her stony eyes. "There is no improvement possible—no change, for better or for worse, until the great change comes; when I shall lay my burden down, and be at rest."

There was a light step upon the gravel. I looked up; Mr. Ridgway was at the further end of the walk swinging his cane as he approached us, with a placid aspect. But he glanced keenly at both faces as he said:

"March winds are treacherous, my dear. It is too cold for you to be sitting here."

"I am not like the wind," she returned, calmly, "and it does me no harm." Their eyes met.

I thought Assunta was about to speak again, but she checked herself, and, rising, walked silently towards the house.

"Well, Mr. Luttrell, and how fares your work?" Mr. Ridgway laid a light hand upon my arm; and I took the double hint—first, that the master expected his labourer to be earning his wage at this hour; secondly, that I was by no means to follow the lady, but to remain with him. I answered that I had done

my morning's work; it was necessary that some preparation I had applied should be left to dry for several hours, before I again touched the canvas.

"Has Mrs. Ridgway been more communicative to you this morning? Has she thawed under the rays of old acquaintanceship?" he asked, with a careless air, which veiled but indifferently the sharpened curiosity with which he looked at me.

"On the contrary; she seems to shrink from conversation. I fear she is very far from well, Mr. Ridgway. Do you not think it would be advisable to have further medical advice?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You cannot 'minister to a mind diseased.' There is nothing but time—time and a little philosophy. That enables one to bear most things in life, if she would only think so. What is the use of brooding over the past, and imaginary ills of every kind, instead of seizing the pleasures of the hour, eh? There is something in the *Persæ* of *Æschylus* to that effect, if I remember right."

On the morning of the fourth day I received the following letter:

"London, March 7th.

"DEAR LUTTRELL,—My brother says he was sent for eighteen months ago by Mr. Ridgway, and made the journey to Hapsbury expressly for the purpose of seeing that gentleman's wife. He remained there one night. She was suffering from hysteria and great mental irritability, tending to produce delusions of a painful character. His advice was that she should be watched, and that care should be taken to avoid any excitement for her. He did not consider, at that time,

that restraint was necessary. This is all the information upon the case my brother says he is justified in giving.* As to the subject of the unhappy lady's delusions, that is a point upon which he will always consider himself in honour bound to be silent.

"I am, dear Luttrell, very truly yours,

"F. L."

So far, then, this evidence was in Mr. Ridgway's favour, and it confirmed a painful impression which had been daily strengthening in me, that the balance of Assunta's mind was, in some measure shaken. Every evening, and on the rare occasions when we met during the day, she observed her immovable demeanour, never again relaxing even to the extent she had done in the garden on the first morning after my arrival. It was not the aspect of mere dejection; there was something unnatural about it, as though the exercise of self-restraint taxed the power of the sufferer almost beyond endurance. She never seemed to do anything; she sat for hours at her window, and would give me a little nod as I passed; sometimes I heard a few wild chords on the piano; but the sweet soul of the music I had known in bygone days was not there. I tried to arouse her interest about books; but she, whose intelligence had formerly been so keenly alive to such topics, now responded apathetically to every appeal of the kind. Her thoughts, it was clear, were fixed immovably on one subject; it remained but to ascertain whether, upon that subject, her ideas were lucid and coherent. How was this to be done in the face of a stony reserve, which it seemed hopeless to penetrate?

I had been at Hapsbury nine days; it wanted but

one more to complete my work; and by no subterfuge could I prolong my stay. Late on the afternoon of the 12th of March occurred an incident which elicited a reply to the question which I have above recorded.

CHAPTER XI.

THE fierce March winds which had swept across the wolds during the past week had given way to a mild beneficent rain, softening the cracked earth, and healing its suffering vegetation. Husbandmen and fox-hunters alike rejoiced; the latter indeed regarded it as a boon sent especially from heaven for the promotion of their favourite sport. "You see, sir," as the old coachman said to me, "the groun's as 'ard as nails, and knocks them poor 'osses' legs about terrible." Not that Mr. Ridgway cared, either as agriculturalist or sportsman. The bitter blast chapped his face as he sauntered up and down the terrace in a sable coat, polishing a line of his translation, and therefore he was glad of the change. Otherwise, the tender shoots, too early forced forward by a warm February, might be cut off for all he cared, and fox-hunters be exterminated from the face of the iron-bound earth. With his proclivities it was much that he was not that abhorred thing, a "vulpicide." It might have been looked for that he should have trapped every fox in his covers, and have rigidly shut his park gates against "the field" when in full cry. But diplomacy led him always to try and stand well with his fellow-men when neither obstinacy nor resentment ranged themselves on the opposite side, as they did in the case of his feud with the village.

The master of the hounds had permission to draw the Hapsbury covers when he pleased; and once at least in the season the meet was at the house itself, when a sumptuous breakfast was prepared for such as were disposed to avail themselves of Mr. Ridgway's hospitality.

On the day in question the hounds had met some miles distant. But the direction of the wind, which had shifted round to the south-west, led my friend the coachman to predicate that, if found, Master Reynard would be likely to run in our direction. The rain cleared away as the day wore on, and late in the afternoon, my work being completed, I set off for a distant hill in the park, which commanded a vast expanse of country. A dweller in the great city from my youth upwards, I had had few opportunities of seeing the chase, but it had always possessed great attractions for me from a pictorial point of view. There is no prettier sight, I think, than the hounds in full cry, and a large "field" after them. On this memorable afternoon I toiled over some ploughed fields and up a steep bit of down, in the hopes of getting a sight of the run, if it should haply come in this direction; and I was rewarded. When three parts up the hill, I caught the faint sound of the huntsman's horn from a distant cover, and then presently the yelping of the hounds and the far off "Tallyho!" reached me, growing stronger as I breasted the rising ground. A moment more and they came in sight—in front, a reddish brown speck, scudding away for dear life across the fields, followed, after an interval of shouting, hallooing, and yelping, by other specks, white and liver-coloured, and then a great stream of riders in scarlet, pouring

from the wood at every issue. I watched them down by the furzy hollow, to some water-meadows, and over a brook which skirted the park on this side; then Reynard slipped through the fence, and was away across the open sward, making straight for the house, while the "field" took advantage of a gate a few yards further on, and swept into the park in straggling defile. I ran down the hill, hoping to come in for the death in the open, for now the thick coppice hid them all from my sight; but by the time I had traversed field and coppice all vestige of them had disappeared, and the deep quiet of twilight was beginning to gather over the park. I walked rapidly towards the house, which was still a mile distant: there was not a sound; nothing to indicate that a great company had just passed that way, and must still be near at hand. As I skirted the lake, and the Italian portico and flight of steps came in sight, I saw, to my surprise, a crowd of men on foot, and several hunters, held by grooms, around the entrance. What could this mean? Had the fox been killed on the very door-steps? I hurried on; and when I broke into the public footpath, a few yards from Assunta's window, there she stood, with dilated eyes, one hand twisted in the string of the window-blind, the other clutching the sill. She did not see me; she saw nothing but the knot of men in scarlet under the portico. A man passed me on horseback at full gallop.

"The doctor lives four miles off," I heard a man say, as I came up.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"A gentleman has had a very bad fall. I'm afraid he's killed."

"No, no; not so bad as that; he's only stunned, and his head is hurt. If we could but get a doctor!"

"It was nothing of a jump," said another, "and Harry, who never stops at anything!—how the deuce did it happen?"

"He'd been up all night as usual, and was screwed when he came out; and he has had a pull at his brandy-flask whenever he could during the day. I saw he'd no seat as we were galloping along in the open."

"Who—who is the gentleman?" I asked, with a horrible anticipation of the truth.

"Mr. Walbrooke, of the Grange."

I ran up the steps and pushed by the crowd of servants in the hall, forcing my way into Mr. Ridgway's morning-room, on the left-hand side, where they told me poor Harry lay. I found him stretched upon the sofa, surrounded by three or four gentlemen; one ripping open the high black stock men wore in those days, another dashing water into his face, women-servants hurrying to and fro with sponges and basins, Mr. Ridgway standing just so much concerned as good breeding demanded, with his back to the fire. I looked upon my old friend's face—the face that I had known in boyhood so fresh, so very fair, so full of glee and impudence. It was hardly recognisable. Bloated, swollen, great purple strains under the eyes, deep furrows from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth, I asked myself whether it was possible that this could be the man I had last seen scarcely three years ago? He remained insensible. A little stream of blood flowed from the temple, which the women stanchd.

"How soon can the doctor be here?" I asked.

"It all depends on whether he is at home when the message reaches his house," replied Mr. Ridgway. "Jane, there is a spot of blood on the carpet. You had better have Mr. Walbrooke carried to a bedroom. It is impossible that he can be removed from the house to-night. Mr. Mandeville, will you not have a glass of sherry before your long ride home?"

The gentleman thus appealed to, and violently roused to a consciousness that he was not expected to remain much longer in attendance upon his friend, boldly said that, with Mr. Ridgway's permission, he would stay till the doctor's arrival. The others who, I take it, were but slightly acquainted with their host, meeting with no encouragement to do likewise, left the room one after another.

"You will find refreshment in the dining-room," said Mr. Ridgway, with infinite urbanity. "Thomas, show these gentlemen the way, and admit no one else but the doctor when he comes."

We carried poor Harry between us to an upper chamber, and laid him on the bed. About half-an-hour after the doctor arrived. He pronounced that there was a slight concussion of the brain, from the effects of which the sufferer was even now slowly reviving. The collar-bone and two of the ribs were broken. What the internal injuries might be it was impossible, at present, to ascertain.

"Cut off his clothes as soon as you can, and get him into bed before he becomes conscious of pain," said the doctor. And Mr. Mandeville and I performed this operation, aided by one of the servants. It was lucky we did so. Scarcely was the poor fellow free from his saturated, mud-stained garments, when his

whole body became convulsed by the most violent twitchings, followed by groans, rising gradually into shrieks. The eyes glared wide, utterly unconscious of all around; a cold sweat started out upon his forehead, and then suddenly a tremor seized him from head to foot. For some time he seemed incapable of articulation; his lips moved, and he uttered wild yells, like those of some tortured animal, but he said nothing, until at last, leaping up in the bed, he shouted:

"Take them away! For God's sake, man, take them! They're crawling all up me. There! there! my arm. They've got hold of my arm—ugh! They're getting inside me! They're choking me! Kill them, for God's sake! Can't you see them? black, slimy things—ugh! They're fastening on me; they're sucking my blood out. Help! Will no one take them off? There, man, there! They are plain enough. Damnation!"

And the shriek that followed must have resounded to the furthest corner of the house. It is enough to give a sample of his ravings. Over the painful scene that followed I draw a veil. It took four of us to hold him down, and his injuries, poor fellow, made it doubly difficult and cruel work. The doctor poured a little brandy down his throat from time to time, then as the violence of the attack subsided he sank back, cowering among the pillows, and sobbing like a child. I was thankful that he knew no one, that he had no recollection of what had befallen him, or knowledge of where he was. Mr. Mandeville had now departed; the doctor and I and a servant were left with Harry; Mr. Ridgway, much to my annoyance, kept looking in from time to time, studying the scene in a philo-

sophic spirit from the doorway, and then sauntering out. I took advantage of the momentary lull in the frenzied man's condition to go into the passage and beg Mr. Ridgway to keep away from the room.

"Send up another man if you will; the coachman is strong, and if another violent attack comes on we shall want him, but keep away yourself. You can do no good, and if he were suddenly to remember you, I can't say what the consequences might be. We must keep him in ignorance of where he is, when he recovers his consciousness, as long as possible, Mr. Ridgway."

"By all means," said my host, with a smile. "Were I vindictive, I could wish the poor wretch no worse punishment for his brutal insolence to me—(do you remember that night, just five years ago?)—than to be reduced to such a state as this. It might cure Mrs. Ridgway of some of her sentimentality to see him now, with that blotched and bloated face."

"For heaven's sake," said I, "see that Mrs. Ridgway remains in her own wing of the house, out of hearing of the poor fellow's ravings, if possible."

Mr. Ridgway looked at his watch.

"It is very near the dressing-bell. Shall we put off dinner for half-an-hour?"

"I can't leave him. You must excuse me. I could eat nothing if I came down."

Mr. Ridgway shrugged his shoulders, with a little pitying smile for my weakness, and turned upon his heel.

The hour wore on. The sufferer's restlessness increased again. It was impossible to set the broken bones in his present condition. From the unshuttered

window the last gleam of twilight died out, and night closed over the tops of the elm-trees in the park. Some one brought in a candle, and set it on a distant table. There was a strong light from the fire, which fell on the pillow, on poor Harry's wild eyes and fevered cheek, as he tossed from side to side, muttering and moaning. By this time they must be at dinner in the room immediately below. I thought of poor Assunta, sitting opposite her lord, and I wondered whether, by any evil chance, she had learnt who was the sufferer up-stairs. The doctor asked if it was possible to get some ice. I opened the door, which was directly opposite the bed, softly, to waylay a servant in the hall, without ringing the bell. As I did so, I thought I heard a rustle in the passage, but all was instantly still again, and I could see nothing. I called to the butler over the stair:

"We want some ice. Are Mr. and Mrs. Ridgway at dinner?"

"Only Mr. Ridgway, sir. Mrs. Ridgway is not quite well, and is keeping her room. I'll send to the ice-house at once, sir."

It was a relief to find that Assunta was not so near at hand. Her own room was far away from the main body of the house. I shut the door, as I believed, and returned to the sufferer's bedside. He cried aloud that the faces of devils were gibbering at him from the corners of the room, that they were waiting to spring upon him, and then, before we could stop him, with a sound which was something between a howl and a scream, he bounded from the bed, and made one rush towards the door. It was open, and there stood Assunta, with clasped hands, clinging to the

lintel, her white lips parted, her eyes wild with horror, trembling from head to foot. The others had seized and dragged back Harry to the bed. I ran to the door, and tried to lead Mrs. Ridgway away, but she clung to the woodwork.

"This is no place for you, you must come away," I said, and I forcibly shut the door from the outside. "Let me implore you to go back to your room, and remain quiet. I will come, by-and-bye, and let you know how he is."

"Remain quiet, ay, remain quiet," she repeated, as if mechanically. Then, her voice rising into a wail, the like of which I have never heard, "Oh! my God! my God! forgive me," she moaned. "It is I who have brought him to this!" And with a cry as that of some wounded bird, she turned and fled down the passage, feeling blindly at the wall for support. My heart yearned to go after her, but what could I do? I watched her white garments fluttering along the dim corridor, until it made a sudden bend, and I lost sight of her. Poor soul! Poor soul!

This second attack of delirium tremens was even more violent than the first, and of longer duration. For nearly an hour it taxed all our strength to keep the poor fellow under subjection, listening, in the meantime, to his cries of abject terror, alternating with the most frightful imprecations. I would that any man with a tendency to drink had passed that hour with us. That awful lesson would have cured him if anything could do so.

The reaction came at last, and he lay there, exhausted, with closed eyes, the ice on his head. The doctor believed he could now set the broken bones.

A woman-servant entered with some bandages. I whispered to her, "Go to Mrs. Ridgway, and say that the gentleman is much better." The clock struck nine.

I fancied I heard a commotion in the house, a hurrying of feet to and fro, the shutting of doors, the calling of many voices, and then, after a little interval, Mr. Ridgway opened the bedroom door, and beckoned me to come out. He was quite calm, but a look in his eyes alarmed me.

"Do you know where Mrs. Ridgway is?" he asked.

"Good God, no! what has happened?"

"She is not to be found. She is nowhere in the house."

For one instant I felt stunned; then a horrible presentiment curdled the blood in my veins, and I grasped his arm with a hand of iron. "The water! man, the water! Not a moment to be lost."

I ran down the staircase, and shouting to some of the men who were gaping there to bring lanterns, I seized a lamp in the hall, and dashed out into the black night, making my way straight for the lake.

One dreadful hour of suspense, the death agonies of hope, followed. That scene is before me now with terrible distinctness, the lights gleaming round the swampy edges of the water, the affrighted wild fowl fluttering in all directions, the shouts of men with torches throughout the park, the gathering crowd of villagers, and then—and then—at last something white is seen among the sedges, a man reaches it with a boat-hook, a great cry goes up from twenty voices at once—it is a body—they turn it over—and the moon shines down upon the upturned face of Assunta.

Life had been long extinct. When she left me

and ran down the corridor, the poor soul, crazed with horror, must have opened a side door, and fled straight to the water. The men, returning from the ice-house, had seen something white flit past. She had cast herself in, face foremost, and had drifted to a place where the reeds and rushes caught the body, and held it wedged in among them.

I knelt beside her on the sward; I supported that dear head, and tried vainly to chafe back the departed life, and I have an indistinct vision of Mr. Ridgway, muffled in furs, standing before me.

In the long night of misery that followed I had but one comfort, one consoling thought—God had mercifully bereft her of reason to take her to Himself. It was as much His will, as much His doing, as though she had been stricken by a lingering illness. Think of what her life, already unutterably wretched, would have been, after witnessing Harry's condition! the tortures of self-reproach that poor solitary soul would have suffered! I remembered the last word of her letter to him, "I shall die in your shame." It was true; the overladen brain had given way, and so, in pity, the All-Wise suffered her to lay her burden down.

I have but little more to add. I must have spoken some bitter words to Mr. Ridgway, I suppose, in the course of that night, but what they were I have forgotten. The following morning I received a cheque for my professional services, with a few lines regretting that, in consequence of what had occurred, Mr. Ridgway was unable "to take leave of me personally." After this dismissal, it was impossible to remain longer at Hapsbury. It distressed me to leave Harry in his pre-

carious state; but the doctor gave good hopes of his being able to be moved to the Grange in the course of a few days; he was conscious and perfectly calm now, and if there was no return of fever, he would do well. I impressed on the doctor the necessity of keeping his patient in ignorance of where he was, and of all that had happened, and I wrote by that post to Mrs. Walbrooke and to Lena, at Paris, urging their immediate return to the Grange to meet Harry, and offering to join them there, if they should require my services in nursing him.

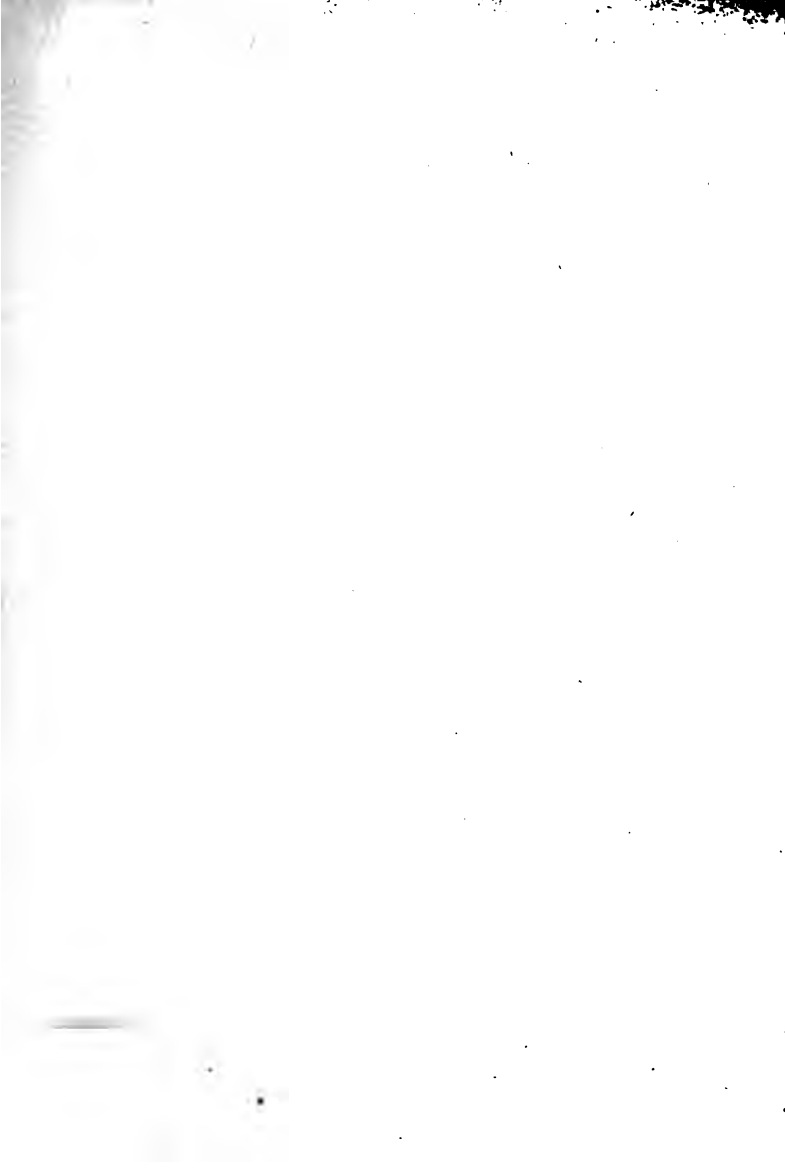
But that summons never came. My injunctions to the doctor, though adhered to in the letter, were unfortunately, as I afterwards learned, violated in spirit. Mr. Ridgway behaved admirably, obtruding himself neither personally nor by any message upon the unfortunate rival thus forced to be his guest, while he gave directions that the sick man should want for nothing. But, by some strange oversight, or the cruel will of fate, Harry's departure from Hapsbury took place on the morning of Assunta's funeral, though an hour after the long pompous train had left the house. As he was being carried down the great stairs, the poor fellow looked around him, and recognised with a shudder of dismay the famous hall of Hapsbury, with its Roman emperors, and marble columns, unlike anything else in the county. Sad-faced servants in deep mourning stood there, and, while he was lifted into his carriage, some workmen were hoisting a hatchment over the great portico. He shut his eyes, and turned deadly white: a minute or two later, the travelling-carriage passed in the park some of the mourning coaches on their return. The sick man looked out as

the first coach went slowly by; a face was at the window, it was Mr. Ridgway's.

Harry never recovered that shock. He insisted upon learning every particular of the frightful catastrophe that had happened, and, in their ignorance of the effect which a knowledge of the truth must have upon him, to appease him, as they believed, they told him all. He divined, no doubt, but too clearly what causes had brought this tragedy to pass, and the blow, falling as it did upon a constitution already undermined, hastened the end which, I believe, could not have been long delayed. Peace be with thee, poor erring Harry! With all thy faults I loved thee dearly, and I often think that, tried as thou wert, many of us might have fallen like thee.

Mr. Ridgway survived his wife twenty years. We never met again. I read his name occasionally in the papers, as present at one of the dilettante societies' meetings, or as having purchased some famous work of art for an enormous sum. And that is all I ever heard of him. He is long since gone to his last account, whither I, too, shall soon be called. What am I, that I should pronounce sentence on him, standing as he now does in the presence of that Judge before whom the secrets of all hearts are laid bare? He was a mystery to me from the beginning: he remained so unto the end; but it was a mystery, alas! that brought ruin and desolation into the lives of those I loved best on earth.

THE
MYSTERY OF THE MOATED-SCHLOSS.



THE MYSTERY OF THE MOATED-SCHLOSS.

CHAPTER I.

COUNT ALBRECHT VON RABENSBERG was the object of some attention in the winter of '44, when he appeared, for the first time, in the salons of Vienna. He was the head of an old Bohemian family; rich, not much past thirty, and handsome. He was, moreover, unmarried. Little was known about him, except that he had large estates, and more than one schloss, where he never resided; that his father had died when he was very young, and his only sister had been drowned, by accident, many years before; and that, left without kith or kin, since the age of eighteen, he had led a wandering life on the face of the globe, never remaining for many months in the same place. He consorted but little with men of his own age, he neither gambled nor drank, and he was said to be proof against all the attentions of women. Whether this was really so or not, such a reputation was, in itself, enough to pique curiosity and excite interest in Vienna, where feminine intrigue spreads its endless network among the roots of an aristocratic society. Add to this, the stern, sad expression of the young man's

handsome face, and his reluctance ever to talk about himself, and the mystery with which it pleased the Viennese world to invest him, could no longer be a matter of surprise.

The world selected a very suitable wife for him—a lovely daughter of the house of L. He scandalously disappointed the world, and chose a wife for himself. He married a simple burgher's daughter; and the indignation which this outrage upon common decency aroused can only be conceived by those who know what the pride of "caste" in Vienna is. How could his infatuation be accounted for? The girl he fixed on was by no means beautiful. A sweet, pale face, a slender, graceful figure, were all young Magda had to boast of. He saw her first in one of the Lust-Gartens of the town, and from that moment his infatuation began. He followed her home; he never rested until he had made the good citizen's acquaintance; he called at the house daily during holy week, and on Easter Monday he asked Magda to become his wife. The girl was almost frightened. It was scarce a fortnight since she had first met the count's intense and searching gaze bent upon her; since she had been conscious of his following her and her mother home; scarce ten days since he first called, that cold March morning, when Magda's hands were red from the household washing, and she felt ashamed of them, as she knitted with downcast eyes, and replied in monosyllables to the questions of the deep-eyed, melancholy Graf. It had all passed like a dream, so fantastic and unreal it seemed. She was still a little afraid of him. He was very handsome and charming, no doubt; and no young maiden could be insensible to the devotion of such a

knight; but his gravity and the difference of their rank a little oppressed her. She had scarcely accustomed herself to his daily visit, scarcely felt at ease in his presence, when he startled her by laying all he possessed at her feet. And with some trembling, some unaccountable misgiving at heart, she faltered "Yes."

The cackling this event caused throughout all classes (for high and low were equally interested therein) was increased by the haste with which the marriage was hurried on. Of course, it was said the poor young man had been entrapped into it; there were hints that he had been made drunk; there were even darker hints thrown out, without one shadow of foundation; but these lies had scarcely time to permeate society, when the news burst like a bomb into the midst of it, that the ceremony had actually taken place in private, and that Count von Rabensberg and his bride had left Vienna.

The count's conduct was no less strange after marriage than it had been before. He worshipped his young wife with a passionate curiosity, so to speak, which seemed allied to some other mysterious feeling, deep-seated and unexplained. Now and again he would lie at her feet for hours, gazing into her eyes, as Hamlet may have done into Ophelia's, with a silent, half-sorrowful ecstasy; rising on a sudden, with a wild rapture, to cast his arms about her and cover her with kisses. By degrees she became used to his ways, more at ease under his long silences, less startled by his sudden passionate outbursts. There were times, too, when he would talk with an eloquence, the like of which she had never heard, of all that he had seen or read, and tell strange tales of adventure with a charm

which would have won the heart of a less willing listener. The sweet German nature, looking out of those calm blue eyes, grew by degrees closer to his; her happiness expanded daily, sending forth stronger shoots and tendrils, which clasped themselves around whatsoever belonged unto her "mann"—her Albrecht. His word would have been her law under any circumstances; it became a law of devotion, and not of discipline alone.

They spent three weeks on the Danube: they visited a large estate of the count's, near Pesth. Then, towards the end of the second month after their marriage, they moved to the old mansion of the Rabensbergs at Prague; worm-eaten, gloomy, uninhabited for years, with rust on its hinges, and grass-grown courts, and the sorrow of many generations hanging over it like a pall. The count was more pre-occupied, more strange in his demeanour than usual that night. After supper, when the servants had left the room, he said suddenly:

"We shall only be here two nights, Magda. . . . To-morrow I must leave thee alone for the day. I go to Schloss Rabenberg, which is but a few hours' journey . . . to prepare it for thy reception, my darling . . . and then——"

He abruptly broke off: pressed her to his bosom, and struggled to cast aside the care which had weighed upon his spirits all the evening. The young wife was not very keen sighted; she soon forgot the shadow, in the sunshine, artificial though it was; and slept that night the calm sleep of a child, unconscious that her husband never closed his eyes, but lay and watched

with a look of intense anxiety, the sweet untroubled face beside him.

He was off by daybreak; and Magda wandered about the house feeling a little lonely, and dreaming old-world dreams in the great desolate rooms, half the day. She drew a spinning-wheel from a dusty corner in one of the rooms, and set it near a window; bravely resolving to employ herself. It proved a failure; the thread broke every minute, and she pushed the wheel aside, in despair. She could not sit down to her knitting to-day; she wanted something to employ her thoughts, and not her fingers only. She turned to the pictures; she examined them all in detail; they were mostly portraits, and among them was one which struck her young imagination forcibly; she came back to it again and again—why she could not tell. There were splendid looking warriors, but it was not one of these; gay courtiers, and fair ladies in farthingale and ruff, but none of them possessed for her the attraction of a portrait representing a plain woman in the hideous dress in fashion fifty years since. The face was wholly unlike Albrecht's, unlike any one Magda remembered; unless indeed—but the fancy was absurd! Her own eyes, as the glass told her, were soft, light blue; these were grey, and anything but soft; passionate intensity was their characteristic, and the secret of their rivetting the spectator. Those eyes would not let themselves be forgotten; the only beautiful spot in the picture, it was natural she should think and speculate about them; but why should they seem to her like the broken, confused reflection of her own eyes, given back by the troubled waters of a steel-cold lake? There was neither name nor date affixed to the portrait, and no servant

in the house knew who the original was. She returned to the room twice to look at it; and the memory of it haunted her long after the shades of twilight had gathered round; until the clatter of a horse's hoofs in the court-yard roused her to Albrecht's return.

He came in looking excited, but worn and anxious, and after embracing her tenderly, he almost immediately began thus:

"We leave this to-morrow morning, my dearest Magda. Art thou prepared to start?"

"Surely. . . . We go to Schloss Rabensberg? . . . I shall be glad to get out of this gloomy house, Albrecht."

"Schloss Rabensberg is still gloomier, Magda. It is surrounded by a moat, and stands in the midst of a wild forest. The walls are thick and the windows small. . . . It is not a cheerful residence, my poor child."

"Never mind. I shall get accustomed to it, Albrecht. It is the country—and we can walk about the woods all day long in the sweet summer time; and at night I shall not mind the gloom, with thee."

"Ah! . . . that is it." . . . He paused; and then continued with an effort, "Magda, I have to put thy love to a strange test. . . . Art thou ready to undergo a separation from me, for awhile—for my sake?"

"What dost thou mean, Albrecht?"

"That for reasons I cannot explain, I earnestly wish thee to go to Schloss Rabensberg—but *alone*. Thy stay there . . . unless, indeed, I am able to join thee, which I pray to Heaven I may eventually do . . .

will not be one of many days, probably, but while it lasts, we shall not meet."

"Oh, Albrecht!" she began; but she saw that in his face which stopped her; a look of such intense, suffering anxiety for her reply, that the words of entreaty died on her lips. He went on.

"Perhaps I have no right to ask this of thee, my treasure. It is early days to demand such a sacrifice—but if thou knewest—if"

She laid her little pale face on his shoulder. "Only tell me what good my going can do?"

"I cannot I can only say this. There is a fatal spell over my poor old house, which I believe thou—and thou alone in the world, Magda, canst remove."

She opened her blue eyes wide. What could he mean? Did he take her for a child? But no; his tone was too serious for jesting. Some of Hoffman's wild tales recurred to her. Was the place haunted? To her German imagination, brought up to regard the relations of the positive with the spiritual world as close and constant, nothing seemed impossible. But what could he mean by saying that *she* alone could remove the fatal spell?

He felt the little heart palpitate against his; and he continued at length in a sorrowful voice,

"No, my Magda, I see the ordeal is too severe.... We will turn our faces the other way, and go far from hence, and begin a new life with another people ... and try to forget Schloss Rabensberg!" he added bitterly.

She raised her head.

"No, I will do it, Albrecht. . . . Forgive me, and try and forget my folly . . . it is past now. I will do whatever thou biddest me, du allerliebster Albrecht!"

She flung her arms about him; and he, in return, expressed his gratitude in the most impassioned language. All that need be recorded here were these words:

"I shall be near thee, mein schatz, very near, and thou shalt know daily tidings of me in some sort, though we may not meet. . . . Neither may Lottchen accompany thee; but thou wilt find four old and faithful servants in the schloss, one of whom will undertake Lottchen's duties. . . . For the rest, my Magda, all the counsel I will give thee is never to let the pure and holy thoughts which are thy constant companions give place to superstitious terrors, at Schloss Rabensberg. Such thoughts are mighty angels to drive out all idle fear. Be simple, unsuspecting of evil; trustful of the good God; be thyself in short—and all will be well with thee!"

The night passed; and soon after breakfast the next morning, they set off on their strange and melancholy journey, unaccompanied by any servant. As Magda descended the steps of the gloomy old mansion which had seemed to her as little better than a prison the day before, she felt almost a pang of regret; for here, at least, she and Albrecht had been together, and here no mystery had reigned. Those lonely hours—the picture which had so fascinated her, all was now forgotten; her mind was absorbed by one subject alone.

At the end of half a day's journey they came to rugged upland country. Here were ravines down

which the thread of some now shrivelled mountain stream forced its way through grey slags, and the prone stems of blasted firs. Here, too, were swampy hollows, rank with overgrowth of poisonous vegetation, and rising out of them, anon, great strips of slaty rock, tumbled about, as by a giant's hand, and crowned with the dislocated trunks of trees. It was clear that the storms here every winter were very violent, and the hand of man did nothing to repair the injuries of nature. A more desolate district it was impossible to find in the kingdom of Bohemia. And, it formed an appropriate prelude to the black, silent forest, in the centre of which stood Schloss Rabensberg. Here was no song of bird, nor sound of water; nothing but the utter stillness of moveless boughs, in the hot summer evening. The road shot like an arrow through the pines, whose tall red stems, in a serried mass, rose to an intolerable height, before they stretched forth their sinuous arms, clasping their hard dark fingers so closely as almost to shut out the blue face of heaven. Now and again there was a cross-road, or narrow path losing itself speedily in the red blackness of the pine-trunks; and still the main road swerved not, but bore on for upwards of an hour without break or point of light on the horizon.

They had sat silent for a long time, their hands in each other's; their faces, the one anxious and excited, the other, repressing by a heroic effort any symptom of nervousness; when Albrecht jumped up, and called to the postillion to stop. Magda, leaning forward, saw that the wood was at last breaking; what seemed to be an open space lay some few hundred yards before them. Albrecht stooped, and drew out a box

from under the seat of the carriage. He then unlocked and took from it, to Magda's infinite surprise, a queer little hat, and still queerer little garment, the like of which Magda had never seen, but which she subsequently learnt had been called in former days, "a spencer." Moreover, there was a short and narrow skirt of silk, having an absurd little flounce round the bottom, such as Magda believed her mother had worn years ago. She asked, with a smile of wonder, what all this meant.

"Thou dear heart!" cried Albrecht, embracing her, "it means that here we must part, and that I beg, as a further favour to me, that thou wilt exchange thy pretty hat and mantle for these faded old-fashioned ones: nay, if it be possible, thy skirt also. Do not ask any questions. It is a fancy of mine—an absurd fancy, that in the old house where all belongs to another date, another generation, thou shouldst not seem to flout the poor old servants and the pictures on the wall, with thy new-fangled clothes. . . . And now farewell, my beloved one! . . . God keep thee! Be of good courage, and Heaven will reward thy going!"

With that he kissed her with an energy akin to desperation, and leaped from the carriage. The tears forced themselves into her blue eyes, though she tried to smile as she tied on the little old hat, and slipped on the spencer. The carriage was then rolling on, and she blew him kisses, and sent him April smiles through her tears, as long as he was in sight. Then when the carriage turned sharply to the left, and she could no longer see him, the sun went in, and the shower was heavy. The poor child felt that she was now, indeed, alone. A moment afterwards the carriage drew up on

the edge of a small square lake, in the centre of which, without an inch of earth to spare on any side, rose an equally square grey stone building with a high red-tiled roof, and innumerable towers, turrets, and pinnacles, breaking the sky line. Through the moat—for such the lake was termed—a stream flowed constantly, born among the hills, and growing in its passage through the forest, till it had been widened and deepened by the hand of man into this broad basin, and was then suffered to escape, a dwindled rivulet, and hide itself in the forest once again. Looking down from the windows of the schloss, one saw to the very bottom of the dark green water, where long weeds and grasses, like dusky plumes, swayed to and fro with the current, and the great brown shadow of a fish darted, ever and anon, athwart the mystery of tangled rushes; and carrying the eye on towards the bank, one caught moreover a confused outline of crawling animal life, wherewith the black ooze teemed. It was like looking down into a human heart (if such a thing could be), and watching its network of multifarious miseries and desires, drifted by the secret currents of passion—the swift thought darting across it—the crawling meanness lurking in the impurity of its muddy places.

A long-disused portcullis showed that there had once been a drawbridge: but a narrow one, for foot-passengers only, had supplanted it, some time in the preceding century, and had already acquired a respectable air of antiquity.

Two old men, in liveries of a strangely old-fashioned make, were standing on the bridge. They were evidently waiting for Magda, and as the calèche drew up, they let down the steps, and handed her out.

The postillion had received his orders, no doubt, beforehand. The grey-headed men had no sooner lightened the carriage of its human freight, and cut the cord of the valises that hung behind, than, without a word, he turned his horses' heads, and drove off into the forest by the way he had come. To poor Magda, it seemed as if the last link that held her to the dear outer world—that held her to her Albrecht, was now severed. She looked up at the stern unfriendly building and down at its black shadow in the moat, and she shuddered as she passed under the iron teeth of its portcullis, and heard the gate locked behind her. She found herself in a low stone hall, the groined roof of which rested on arches. At the further end was a winding stair, which led to the dwelling-rooms.

A woman, past middle-age, stood expectant in the middle of the hall, and came forward to kiss Magda's hand, after the old German custom, as her new mistress entered. But though there was no want of alacrity shown in rendering this conventional act of respect—as there was no want of alacrity, indeed, in anything the woman did—nothing of pleasure was evinced. One might have thought that the greeting a pretty young creature to that grim old place, tenanted hitherto only by grim old servants, might have brought some spark of cordiality into their eyes—which foreign servants are not afraid to let light up their faces. But it was not so here. The old men looked grave—grave and rather sad, it seemed to Magda. The woman looked stern, keen, and resolute. In spite of her years, she was evidently still strong, and unusually active. Her eye was quick and bright; her walk, and all her movements, betokened decision and promptitude. She

was dressed in black stuff, and her grey hair was put back under a black cap; no speck of white relieved the general mournfulness of her aspect.

Magda tried to smile, and say something gracious to the old woman. She was perfectly respectful in her reply, but as hard as nails; the swift eye was raised, and the tight-shut lips unclosed, just so much as was absolutely necessary, no more; then she pounced upon shawls and cloaks as an eagle might swoop upon his prey, and led Magda up-stairs, without further ado, the two old men following with the valises. The geography of the schloss was less intricate than that of most old buildings. At the top of the stairs ran a long passage, which turned and twisted, it is true, and from which sundry other flights of stairs debouched, to the bewilderment of a stranger who was not closely observant. But at the end of this passage was a door, which the woman unlocked from a bunch of keys hanging at her side; and after this all was simple enough. A short flight of steps led into one of the many towers which Magda had seen from the bridge. This tower—that portion of it, at least, into which Magda was now taken—contained two good-sized rooms, one over the other, a winding stair communicating. The lower room was oak-panelled, and in it were an old piano, a harp, a few direfully bad prints of the House of Hapsburg, in the beginning of this century, and one of the retreat from Moscow. Klopstock's Messiah and an odd volume or two of Lessing were upon one table, together with a very faded work-basket, and an old Spa-box, with the *Allée des Soupirs* (in which the trees looked like tufts of blue-green feathers upon hairpins), much defaced by

time, upon its lid. Upon the other table a cloth, with preparations for supper, was laid. It was the only thing in that strange room, where all seemed to have remained forgotten and untouched for the last twenty years, that spoke a living language—the same, unchanged by fashion, wherein our fathers made ready to eat. A substantial pie, some slices of raw ham, and a carp from the moat stewed in red wine, would, from all time, have seemed an excellent German supper, but Magda felt in no wise disposed to do it justice. She asked to see her bedroom, and the old woman led her up-stairs to the corresponding chamber above, the only difference in the shape of the two being that this latter had a wide oriel window overhanging the moat—an excrescence supported by a corbel, like the “Parson’s Window” at Nuremberg.

The room was hung with old Flemish tapestry; a quaint stove of green delf towered up in one corner, a dressing table and tarnished mirror in another. The bed, which was like a black box with the lid turned back, disclosing a yellow eider-down quilt, discouraged, rather than invited, the weary to lie down and take their rest. It was raised on a single step, a daïs, and stood at right-angles between the door and window. The back, which I have compared to the lid of the box, was of solid black oak, carved with grotesque figures; there were curtains at the head and none at the feet; but a board rose up, like the stone at the foot of a grave, with the date “1600” carved thereon. Upon a nail at the head of the bed hung a crown of immortelles, and the name “Louise,” fashioned out of the same flowers, after the German manner. The flowers were brown with age, and many of them had

dropped; similar chaplets, blown and beaten with the rain and wind, Magda had seen on every headstone in the graveyard where her mother lay.

"Whose name is that? Who was Louise?" she asked of a second old woman, less active than the first, who now appeared, proffering her services as "kammerjungfer," while the other left the room.

"It was the gracious young lady," replied the old servant, dropping her voice till it ended in a low sigh. Magda felt more drawn towards her by that touch of feminine softness, less afraid to question her than her falcon-eyed predecessor.

"And when did she die?" continued Magda.

"Twenty-one years ago," whispered the old woman, glancing round. "But, may it please the gracious lady, it is forbidden to speak on the subject."

"Why?" said Magda, grown almost bold by her curiosity, and by her confidence in the kindly wrinkled face before her. "Who forbids you?"

"It is forbidden," she repeated. "The gracious lady does not know . . ." She glanced round once more, and shook her head—a more effective close to her sentence than any spoken words.

"What is your name?" asked Magda, after a pause, during which her heart seemed to stand still. "And whereabouts do you sleep? Is it anywhere near me?"

"My name is Bettine. . . . I sleep a long way off, in another tower. But Hanne sleeps close at hand to the gracious lady. She is the head. All the gracious lady's orders must be given to her. I am but the second. . . . I was kammermädchen to the Fräulein Louise, and so I have remained here."

Magda went to the window and looked out. Twi-

light was slowly creeping up over the black wood in front of her; the frogs were croaking on the edges of the moat below; there was no song of birds, no brisk barking of dogs, nor lowing of cattle; no cheerful sound of other living thing. The stillness, broken only by that horrible hoarse music, was almost unbearable. She said to her attendant:

"Is it always like this? Is there never any noise? Does no one ever come here?"

Bettine shook her head for all reply.

Then Magda descended the turret again slowly, and returned to the parlour. One of the white-haired men was waiting to serve her at supper, and so she sat down, and made a semblance of eating. When this ceremony had been gone through, the night was fast closing in; the shadows deepened in the corners of the old room; a purple bar widened and spread over the gold floor of heaven. Perhaps it was then that the young Gräfin felt her loneliness to the full for the first time. She opened the old piano; she passed her fingers over the loose, yellow notes of the hand-board. What dreamy old waltzes it had known in times when that dance was not the mad whirl it has now become, but a slow, swimming measure! What Ländler and wild Bohemian tunes, which had now passed away into the realm of things forgotten! No doubt the hands that once loved to wander over those notes were long since still. Had it the gift of speech, how much that old piano could tell her!

She turned to the table, and opened one of the books.

LOUISE VON RABENSBERG,
1822,
Andenken ihrer geliebten Mutter,

was written in faded ink. Who was this Louise, of whom everything here seemed to speak? No doubt that elder sister of Albrecht's whom he had never named, but of whom Magda had heard as having been drowned twenty years ago. Why was Bettine forbidden to speak of her? What was the mystery concerning this dead daughter of the house of Rabensberg? And was it connected in any way with that "fatal spell" Albrecht had spoken of? His words had been incomprehensible to her at the time; she racked her brain in trying now to determine what definite construction they would bear; and, above all, in trying to find an answer to that question of far closer personal interest. What was the meaning of her being sent here? How could it be given to the humble burgher's daughter to remove any mysterious shadow that hung over the proud old family?

She had once read that to the pure and holy in heart the spiritual world has no terrors; that the weapons of the powers of darkness fall harmless before the innocence of a little child. Could it be that because Albrecht had called her "good," because he believed her to be thus pure and spotless at heart, that he had sent her here to drive out by her presence the dark spirit that hovered over his house?

Alas! alas! if so, she much feared the test would fail. How many sins did not her conscience reproach her with! How often had she been slothful over the housework at home, and negligent of the washing! How much more had she thought of looking neat and pretty when she went to mass, than of the holy service! How reluctant to confess these very sins to Father Paulus, when she had found herself behind the grating in the

Ludwig's Kirchel! Alas! if it depended on an immaculate conscience!

A clock in one of the towers struck nine. The servants brought in, with much pomp and ceremony, two massive silver candlesticks, which they lighted, and then departed. The gloom was only more oppressive than before; an island of pale yellow light was diffused just round the candles, and an impenetrable darkness swallowed up the rest of the room. Magda shivered and went to the window. The moon had risen, and was pouring a flood of silver upon the little bridge, and the trembling reeds and sedges on the bank, and driving back reflections, like knives, into the heart of the steel-blue moat, and waking into a mystery of splendour the crests and shafts of the fir forest yonder. It was a pleasanter scene than that ghostly parlour, and Magda felt an irrepressible longing to go forth into the moonlight; to stand, but for five minutes, on that bridge under the clear vault of heaven, to be so much nearer to Albrecht for a little space, before going to her bed—for in this room she felt it would make her too nervous to sit up any longer. She touched a hand-bell, and Hanne entered.

"Can I" . . . faltered the young Gräfin, annoyed to find her summons thus answered. . . . "Can I step out upon the bridge for a few minutes? Can the castle-gate be unlocked?"

For a second it seemed as if Hanne hesitated.

"The gracious lady's commands shall be obeyed."

She left the room, and a minute or two afterwards Bettine brought in the queer old hat and spencer.

"I want nothing," she said; but she threw the spencer over her arm; "it is so warm. Come with me,

Bettine;" and, passing through the unlocked door of the tower, they traversed the long passage, and descended to the hall. The gate had been unbarred by the old servants, who stood one on each side of it, rigidly erect, as their young mistress passed out.

It was as though a great weight were lifted from her head when she felt the warm night wind blow upon her face, and the myriad stars of heaven above her, instead of the low-beamed roof and worm-eaten panels of that oppressive room. She stood, flooded in moonlight, upon the bridge, and, leaning over the parapet, looked down at the stars in the water, and up at the schloss, on which the moon fell slantways. She could examine its exterior now more leisurely. There was her tower, with its low parlour window below, and the wide-mouthed oriel above, casting a sharp projection of black shade upon the building. Her eye wandered over the many other windows of the schloss, no two of the same size, or at the same level, but set irregularly over the face of the building at uncertain intervals.

One of them, and one alone, stood open; and even now, as Magda looked, a strange thing came to pass.

The fancy seized her that she caught sight of a white face at this window, staring down at her with eyes that glittered in the moonlight.

It was a delusion, no doubt. There was a thin white curtain at this window, which the night breeze fluttered now and again. And, more than this, Hanne's hard grey-haired head appeared, unmistakeable in the clear moonlight, a moment later. To either of these causes it was possible to refer the strange im-

pression produced on Magda; and then the excited state of her nerves rendered her singularly susceptible to such a fancy as this.

While she argued thus with herself, the spencer, which had been gradually slipping from her arm, fell on the parapet, its black arms flying in the breeze, and dropped into the water with a heavy splash. Bettine gave a little cry, but it was echoed by one louder and shriller, and this certainly came from the open window.

"What was that?" said Magda, startled.

Bettine made as though she heard not, but began calling lustily to one of the men to bring a boat-hook, and fish up the gracious lady's mantle.

"Did you not hear a very peculiar sharp cry?" asked Magda, again. "Who could it be?—not Hanne?"

"Yes, begging the Frau Gräfin's pardon—that is the Hanne's room . . . no doubt it was the Hanne's voice . . . it is somewhat shrill, by times."

The face was turned away, and it seemed to Magda that she spoke with a certain hesitation; but these were her words, and she added nothing to them, busying herself thenceforward with the recovery of the garment, which had been carried by the current half-way round the moat. Magda felt by no means satisfied or reassured. There, at the window, was the stern grey face of Hanne, watching her, she knew; it seemed difficult to believe that so self-contained a woman should have yielded to the weakness of screaming! The young gräfin turned away with a shudder, she scarce knew why, and walked slowly to the further end of the bridge. And here her eye was attracted

by something white on the furthest stone of the parapet, upon which the moonlight fell. She stooped; it was a piece of paper, upon which some pebbles had been placed, to prevent the wind's carrying it away. She took it up, and read easily, in the clear moonlight, these words:

"Be of good courage, for my sake. Remember, I am near you. "A."

There came a rush of blood to the poor chilled heart; it was as though new life were infused into her veins. She pressed the paper to her lips, and murmured:

"Du lieber Himmel! . . . 'For his sake,' whate'er betide, I will not flinch from it."

CHAPTER II.

WITH a firmer and more rapid step, Magda recrossed the bridge, and passed under the portcullis once more. She would not return to the parlour. By her desire, Bettine conducted her straight to the tapestried room, which was now flooded with moonlight. She threw the window wide, and then, dismissing Bettine, she knelt down beside the great old-fashioned bed, and prayed—prayed for forgiveness of her many sins, poor little soul!—for courage to meet present trial, whatsoever it might be—for faith that should resist any devil's machination, and strength to overcome temptation. And to this was joined a fervent prayer that "unser Vater" would shield her Albrecht

from all evil, and remove that dark and nameless cloud under which he suffered.

She rose and blew out the candles, which flared in the night breeze, and sent flickering shadows upon the tapestry. She did not need them to undress by, for the room was as light as day. She could see the faces of Ahasuerus and Esther in their royal robes on the wall opposite, with the black-bearded Mordecai, and the evil-eyed Haman hanging on the gallows, which last was a ghastly image enough without the trembling light, by which the corpse appeared to be swaying to and fro.

It was warm; she would leave the window open all night; the moon was friendly; she could hear the wind stirring the topmost boughs of the forest yonder, where Albrecht was; and that was something. She had double-locked the door, and now she slid off the narrow quaint garment wherein she had been attired, and crept into the great black bed, which looked to her so like a grave, with its headstone and its garland in memory of the departed. The clock struck ten, as she lay down, and turned her face towards the window. The moon itself she could not see, though its light streamed in upon the floor; but there were spaces of clear sky, sprinkled with stars, across which the dusky shadow of a bat every now and then flitted. Except the hoarse croaking of the frogs, there was no other sign of life. For a long time she lay awake . . . she heard eleven strike, and then twelve . . . a prey to all manner of fancies. Now she thought that Esther stirred from her place upon the wall, and that she heard the rustle of her royal robes; now it was Ahasuerus who was stepping from his throne, and ad-

vancing to meet her; now Haman's dead limbs seemed to become animated, and the miscreant was descending from the gallows. But, one by one, these fancies wore themselves out. The woven figures came not to life; no sound, not even that of a mouse behind the wainscot, broke the perfect stillness of the night. The imagination, without aliment, cannot keep up for ever at high-pressure pitch; and when youth and health are in the other scale, nature will sooner or later have its way, and claim its right of rest. She fell asleep.

How long she remained so, she never knew; but she started from her sleep with the horrible consciousness that something was near her—something between her and the window—something bending over her, with its face close, close to hers. She lay there breathless, motionless. She tried to scream, to spring from the bed; she could not stir a muscle, and *the thing* stood there, immovable, with its glittering eyes looking down into hers. She knew she had been dreaming; she asked herself, in those few doubtful moments, whether this was a continuation of her nightmare? For, paralysed with terror as she was, strange to say, the deadly face of this shadow brought vividly to her mind the picture which had made so deep an impression on her at Prague. Though this was the face of a shadow, white and hollow, there were the same extraordinary eyes, unlike any Magda had ever seen. The rest was shrouded in black, and the moon from behind touched the edges of one white lock of hair with silver. "Louise!" murmured the shadow; and Magda felt a death-cold hand laid upon hers, outside the coverlet. She trembled so that the very bed shook under her, but she gave no other sign of life.

Lower and lower, closer and closer, bent the shadow. And now, indeed, Magda shut her eyes, and felt that life was ebbing fast from her heart; for the corpse-like face touched hers, and those dead lips rained kisses on her cheek. Then, with a great cry, as though something within her had snapped, Magda felt a sudden momentary power given her to spring from the bed, and run shrieking towards the window. It was but momentary; there was another shriek, the piercing echo of her own; she was conscious of the spectre's rushing towards her, white hair flowing, wild arms tossed into the sky; and then Magda sank in a swoon upon the floor.

Bettine was bending over her with sal-volatile, when she opened her eyes. Hanne stood by the bed, whereon something black lay stretched.

"Mein Gott! sie ist todt!" were the first words Magda heard. They came from the lips of the grim Hanne. The door opened quickly at the same moment, and Magda found herself in Albrecht's arms.

But the next minute he turned towards the bed. Hanne and he interchanged looks; it was enough; and then, leaving Magda to Bettine's care, he ran towards the bed, and threw himself on his knees beside it. . . . Too late! too late! All his hope, then—his heart's first wish for years past—was now frustrated, at the very moment of fulfilment! He buried his head in the coverlid, and Magda heard a low sob. There was no other sound in the room. Then, after a while, she caught these disjointed sentences, wrung from the agony of the young man's soul:

"Du barmherziger Himmel! . . . Is it all over then?

... After so many years, so many!—without one kind look—without a word! It is hard. To go thus from me before the cloud was lifted. . . . Ach! mutter—thou knowest now the truth—open thy lips, but once more—only once, to bless me, even me, thy only son, now that I kiss thy dear hand after so many, many years!” And it was with a tender and sorrowful earnestness that Albrecht performed that simple act of German reverence.

But from the black bed, now more truly like a grave than ever, came no response, no sound, no sign that a living soul lay there; that the ear heard, or the heart felt the passionate adjuration addressed to it.

Magda, as she looked and listened, felt still so utterly bewildered that she could only keep asking herself whether it was not all a dream—whether, in truth, it was her Albrecht whom she saw and heard. Yet, at the window where she lay, the night, with its myriad stars, was gone; the pale opal light of morning was breaking in the east; she could even hear the soft dewy twitter of awakening birds. It was no dream; she could recall it all, the lonely, dreary evening, the terrible night—no, she was not dreaming, and that was her Albrecht, in the flesh, before her. But she felt an aching giddiness in her head; she raised her hand, and withdrew it covered with blood. In falling she had struck herself, and, concealed by the masses of unrolled hair, the wound had escaped Bettine’s attention. The old woman now ran to fetch the necessary means of staunching it, but the loss of blood had been considerable. Magda attempted to raise her head, but the room swam round with her; a film gathered across her eyes, and before Bettine’s return, her

young mistress had relapsed once more into unconsciousness.

Many hours after, in another and very different room in the schloss, a room surrounded with implements of the chase, the walls bristling with antlers, the polished floor pleasantly islanded with skins of deer and chamois, the young gräfin lay upon the jäger's bed, and her husband sat beside her. He had had her carried there, as being the most cheerful room in the house, and here he had been tending her, and (seeing her weak and excited condition) had enforced absolute silence, after her return to consciousness, and had answered her questions in monosyllables. But now, the day was far spent; the darkness, that season of feverish terror during which she had suffered so acutely twenty-four hours before, was at hand; it was well to tell her all, and to calm her mind by a knowledge of the truth. So there he sat, beside the little bed on which his young wife lay, holding her hand, and with a face on which could be clearly traced the impress of a recent and heavy trouble, he told her his story of the past in these words:

"It is all over now, my Magda—the mystery of our moated schloss—the hope and despair of my life, which I dared not confide to thee; it is all over now. I can tell thee everything. . . . Why did I beseech thee to come here? What end was there to be gained by this? Listen. It is a sad enough story, which has embittered all my life, and the effects of which, in some sort, I shall carry to my grave. . . .

"Thou hast heard of poor Louise? She was my only sister, my senior by five years, and my mother's

favourite, who doted on this daughter with an intensity which blinded her to every other object, and made her regard even me—strange as it may seem—in the light of an interloper, whose coming to divide the inheritance with her first-born was an injury and a wrong. My father, on the other hand, was very fond of me; but he died when I was nine; and for many years there was only Louise's sweet nature and her love for me to counteract the coldness and neglect of my poor partial mother. . . . God knows I never resented this. . . . I never ceased to love her; a kind word from her at any time made me as happy as a king . . . and I know *now* that even at that time, poor soul, her brain was in a measure diseased, and she was suffering under the chronic monomania which afterwards assumed an acute form.

"My sister occupied the tower where you slept last night; her sitting-room below, her bedroom above. A panel behind the arras, and a winding stair cut in the thickness of wall, lead from these rooms to those my mother inhabited. Thus she could visit her favourite child at all hours of the day and night without traversing the long corridor and public stair; and of this privilege she availed herself so constantly that I never knew her come to Louise's room by any other way.

"One evening, when I was about fifteen, I was in this room, plaguing my sister while she was dressing, by performing all manner of gymnastic feats, of which I was very proud, but which only alarmed her. At last, I bethought me of a water-pipe outside the window, which ran into the moat, and down which I thought it would be good sport to slide. Before Louise saw what I was about, I sprang on to the window-sill,

and, clinging hold of the mullion with one hand, sought the pipe with the other, and tried to fasten my feet around it. The operation was not an easy or rapid one, and before it was accomplished Louise, with a shriek of terror, had flown to the window, and was endeavouring to hold me back. But it was in vain her fragile fingers clutched me; I was resolved to succeed in my attempt; and now, indeed, I felt my feet were fastened round the pipe securely. Closer and closer I drew myself towards it, and further from the window, until, at last, I let go the mullion.

"Then it was that my poor sister, in her nervous terror, bent her whole body out of the window, and, stretching forth both her hands, she lost her balance, and fell, with one wild scream, headlong into the moat below!

"Never, if I were to live a thousand years, can I forget that moment! How it was I managed to slide down the pipe, I scarcely know, now. I can just remember catching sight of my mother's awful face, and hearing her shrieks at the window; the next minute I was in the water, and striking out in the direction of something that floated near me.

"Half-a-dozen men were in the moat as soon as I was, and between them she was quickly brought to shore, and laid upon the bank; but, alas! the truth was evident at a glance; there could not be a doubt about it; she was dead. She had struck her head in falling, and death had mercifully been instantaneous. Would to God it had come to my poor, afflicted mother!... She had entered that room by the panelled door, at the very moment that Louise lost her balance and fell; and she lost her reason from that hour. It

was Hanne who held her back when she would have thrown herself out after her idolised child. It was Hanne who again held her back when she rushed at me with an open knife. The dislike in which she had always held me was now fomented to positive hatred. She regarded me as the wilful murderer of Louise, and the mere mention of my name was enough to bring on a paroxysm of mania. The doctor decided at once that she must never be permitted to see me. I was sent away to college, and when, at rare intervals, I returned here, my presence never failed to rouse her out of her habitual condition of quiet harmless melancholy into one of ungovernable fury. Thus, for years past I have never been able to set my foot within these walls. The world has long believed my mother to be dead; the poor faithful servants here alone have tended and guarded their old mistress, seeing that she came to no harm, and keeping me regularly informed of the state of her health. She never left the schloss, but wandered to and from Louise's room, by day and night, folding and unfolding her child's clothes, looking at her books in a vacant way, and careful that every little article that had belonged to her should be kept in the very place where Louise left it. The servants told me that she never spoke of Louise as dead; she was always looking for her return. . . .

"When I came to man's estate, my first object was to consult, either personally or by letter, all the most eminent surgeons in Europe who have devoted themselves to the study of insanity, as to my hapless mother's condition. There were several consultations, but little comfort came of them. All agreed, indeed, that such a condition was not absolutely hopeless. Cases had

been known when, by powerfully affecting the heart upon the one subject which had caused madness, the brain had regained its equilibrium. But such cases were rare, and how, in my mother's case, was this end to be compassed? At last, Dr. —, a man full of original expedients, said to me: 'Find, if you can, some girl who closely resembles what your sister was.... Introduce her into the schloss, as nearly as possible under the same circumstances as your sister . . . see what that will do. . . . It may open the sluices of all the poor lady's tender maternal feelings, and thus work a cure. Any way, it can do no harm. I will answer for it, she will not dislike, or try to harm the girl.' . . .

"To comprehend my intense anxiety on this subject, Magda, and the earnest longing wherewith I set about my search, thou must try and enter into my feelings during all these years. Not alone had I been the cause of my poor Louise's death, but also of this enduring and yet more frightful calamity, whereby my mother and I were living on in the world as strangers to each other. . . . It is hardly too much to say that my whole life was embittered by remorse. . . . To feel her hand laid upon my head, to hear her say that she forgave me—this was the dearest hope I then had....

"For many years my search was fruitless. I found fair-haired and gentle girls in abundance, but whenever I tried to trace the desired resemblance, it failed; either voice, or face, or manner, or the soul within, was utterly unlike Louise's. It is rare, after all, to find any two human beings cast in moulds that are at all similar.... But at length, my Magda, I found thee; and in thee, to my great joy, a living image of our lost Louise. . . . Shall I tell thee the truth? I had

little thought of love or marriage, at first. Thy father was poor; I was willing to sacrifice two-thirds of my fortune to the accomplishment of my scheme; with that intention I sought thee. . . . But when I came to know thee, my treasure—ah! then it was different. When I came to see thee in thy quiet home, to note thy tender modest graces, Love found me out and conquered me. I thought, if thou wouldst consent to be my wife, here was the true solution of the difficulty and whether that scheme succeeded or failed, in thee I should, at all events, find a joy and peace that had long been absent from my soul. It has been so—it is so, my darling! The good God has seen fit to take my mother—has not seen fit to bless my original scheme. But he will bless what has grown out of it, that I know.

“I thought it best to conceal the truth from thee. When I brought thee and left thee here alone, it could but have added to thy alarms at first to know of an insane woman’s presence in this dreary place, and of the part thou wert called upon to play. Thou wouldst learn it all, naturally, in the course of a day or two; but by that time some change might have been wrought in her condition. Of course I felt dreadfully anxious, yet I knew there was no danger to be apprehended. . . . Hanne has told me everything. From her window, my poor mother saw thee alight, and her eye kindled as she watched thee. All the evening she was strangely agitated, as they had not known her for years. By-and-by, on the bridge, she again watched thee stealthily; but could not repress a scream when the mantle fell over the parapet—it looked (Hanne says) from the window like a body falling into the water! Her ex-

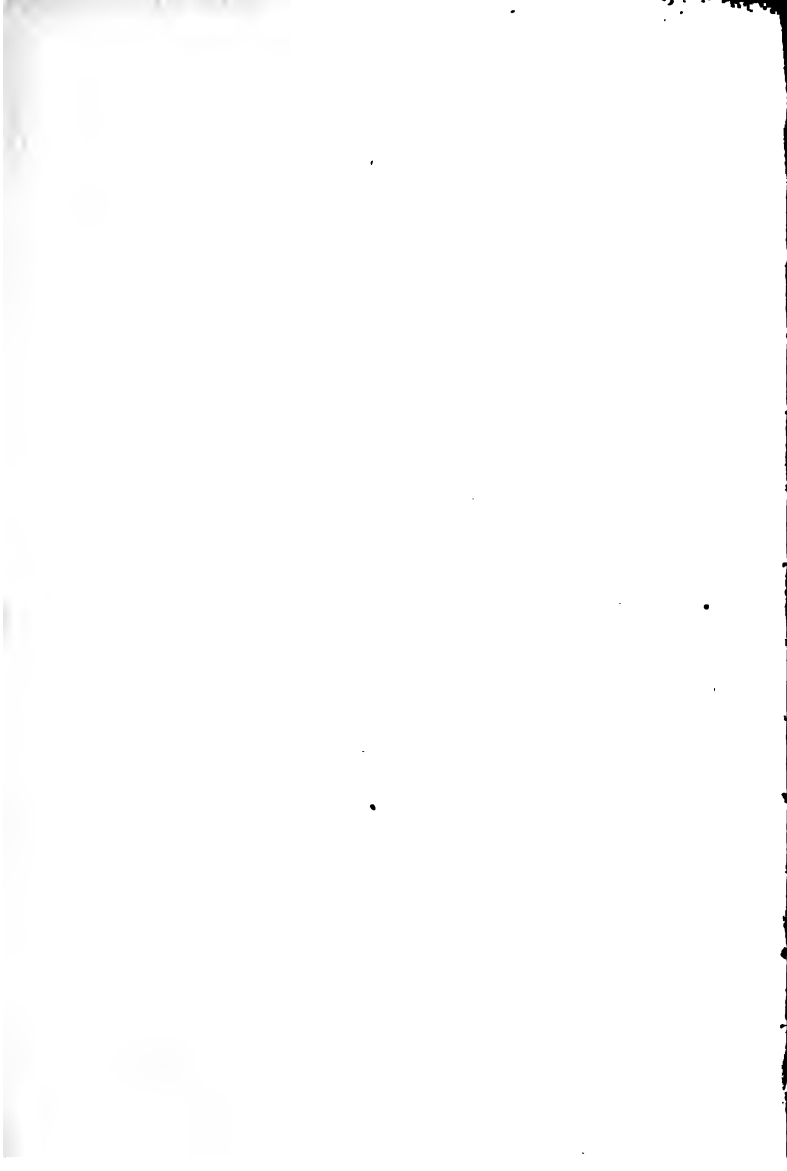
citement increased as the night advanced; yet it seemed as though she doubted, and would test thy identity before approaching thee openly. Instead of going to Louise's room, as usual, every evening, she waited till night was fully come, when she stole up (followed by Hanne), and stood behind the arras, watching thee until thou wert asleep. Then she came forth, and touched thy clothes—the clothes that had been Louise's—and approached the bed softly, and stood looking tenderly upon thee. It was strange, Hanne says, to see the working of her face, and hear her muttered words, until, bending lower and lower, she touched thee with her lips, and whispered 'Louise!'

"This was the crisis. . . . How it might have ended, God knows! but for thy natural terror, my poor child, which made thee spring from the bed and rush screaming towards the window.

"No doubt, in the horror of the moment, it seemed to her, poor soul! that the old tragedy was being re-enacted—the scene whereon her mind had dwelt for twenty years rose up before her, and the mainspring of life, long worn, suddenly snapped. With a great cry, she fell back upon the bed, and died, almost instantaneously, I believe. . . .

"Peace be with her! God's decrees are wise, and in denying our prayers, He sometimes grants to us a yet better thing for our consolation," said the young graf in conclusion, as he pressed his wife to his heart.

THE LEGEND OF DUNBLANE.



THE LEGEND OF DUNBLANE.

"IT was in the year 1793," said my uncle, "that I made acquaintance of William Dunblane, afterwards Lord Dunblane, at the University of St. Andrews. His bachelor uncle, the then lord, was not a very rich man, and he was a stingy one. William's father, too, was still alive, so that the young man was rather straitened as to money. We were just of an age, and my father was very liberal to me. Our relative positions, therefore, were more equal at that time than they afterwards became; and, in spite of the great difference of rank, Dunblane singled me out to be his favourite companion. I cannot say why this was, unless it may have been that I was a more patient listener than many other young fellows, to his long stories about his ancestry, and that while I always endeavoured to tell him the truth, I was more indulgent to this weakness of family pride than the rest were. They used to laugh at him at first; but that, he soon showed them, he would never stand. He was very strong, and very passionate; and his face at such moments became as that of one possessed with a devil."

It was in these words that my uncle, Mr. Carthews, senior partner in the firm of Carthews and Bontor, of Aberdeen and Calcutta, used generally to begin the

following strange narrative. Like many Scotchmen of his day, he had a somewhat inordinate reverence for rank; but it was balanced, in his case, by a business-like appreciation of the value of money. What is of more import, however, to the matter in hand, was his strict and fearless adherence to truth, joined to an extremely kind nature. These characteristics were conspicuous in every transaction of a long life. He was a shrewd, upright man, universally respected in the city where he passed the best part of his life: "stiff in opinions," occasionally prolix, but of a sound, clear judgment, and unimpeached honesty. In the narrative, therefore, which I shall try to give, as far as possible, in my uncle's own words, there is, I am confident, no wilful misrepresentation, no jot nor tittle added to the facts, as he believed them to be. And his opinion of those facts, I take it, was formed very deliberately. I heard him tell the story repeatedly, yet it never varied in the smallest particular; and I know it invariably impressed his hearers with a sense of horrible reality. Imagine that the ladies have left the room; three or four men are seated round the polished mahogany; my uncle, a white-haired, keen-eyed man of seventy, bids us draw our chairs nearer the fire, and, passing round a magnum of his fine old port, he thus continues the story, of which I have given the opening words, with that incisive Scotch accent, and in that measured phrase, which seems to weigh each word in the balance, and reject it if found wanting.

Dunblane was an unpopular man. Men could not make him out. His manner was often disagreeable, and he was subject to moody fits, when he would

speak to no one. He was capable of kind and generous acts, but implacable in his dislikes; and he never forgot an injury. I could manage him better than any one, and he would generally stand the truth from me; but his rage was a terrible thing to witness. I have never seen anything like it. Men used to say, "Keep clear of Dunblane when the fit is on him; he will stick at nothing."

The French Revolution was then at its height. Dunblane was a hot Royalist, and used to be thrown into fresh transports of fury with the news of every act subversive of the king's authority. One night a man, in my room, who professed Republican sentiments, defended the conduct of the Assembly in imprisoning the royal family. Dunblane got up and flung a bottle at his head. There was a fine row, and it was arranged that the two men must fight the next morning. I secretly gave notice to the authorities, however, who interfered, and some sort of peace was patched up; but Dunblane never spoke to his antagonist again as long as he was in the university. I mention this, as I happen to recal the circumstance, just to give you an idea of the man's violence, and of the depth of his resentment.

I can remember, too, a conversation we had one day about marriage. He had been complaining of his poverty, but said that, nevertheless, he meant to marry early.

"You see, it is necessary that I should have an heir, lest the direct line become extinct. There is no one, after me."

"Do nothing in a hurry," I replied. "It would be a great misfortune, no doubt, that the title and estates

should pass away to another branch of the family, but it would be a still greater one to have your whole life embittered by an unhappy marriage. You are young; you have life before you. Be quite sure it is for your happiness, ere you take such a step as this."

His reply was very characteristic.

"Oh," he said, "it is all very well for you to talk, who have plenty of money, and have no great name as an inheritance. We trace back our descent for six hundred years; it is a duty we owe to the country, to keep up the family. If I was fortunate enough to be in your position, I should please myself. But, as it is, everything else is of secondary importance. My lord is always telling me so, and I suppose he is right. I must marry a woman with money, and I must have an heir. You don't know," he added, with the black look gathering on his brow, "*how* essential this is."

I assured him that I fully recognised the obligations which a great name and title entail, but that I could not think that to contract a hasty, ill-considered marriage could ever answer in the long run.

"Ah!" he said. "Then you have never heard the old prophecy in the family:

When five Dunblanes have had no son,
Then shall the line direct be run.

My uncle is the *fourth* lord who has had no son. If he should survive my father, and that I should succeed him, I shall be the *fifth*. You see how necessary it is I should marry early."

"On account of a foolish distich!" I replied. His superstition almost amounted to an insanity; and I never would give in to it, though I confess that I have

known more curious cases of such prophecies being fulfilled than any sceptical Englishman would believe. However, that has nothing to say to the matter in hand. Dunblane repeatedly referred to this prediction, which had evidently taken a hold upon his mind, not to be shaken by any words of mine. He would brood for hours over this and similar subjects. And among them, I have little doubt was one to which he never referred at that time, seeing that I treated his superstitions with unbecoming levity—a subject of which I had no knowledge for many years afterwards, but which was destined to have a fatal influence on his life.

In '96 I left college, and was sent out to our branch house in Calcutta. I heard the following year of Dunblane's marriage to a Miss Cameron, an orphan of good family, though not noble, said to possess both wealth and beauty; and I heard no more. He never wrote to me, nor did I expect it. Our lines of life were now quite different, and though I knew that he would always retain a friendly recollection of me, correspondence was another matter. I was a man of business, and engrossed in affairs in which he could take no interest; while I, on the other hand, knew nothing of the persons and the circumstances by which he was surrounded. Nevertheless I shall always regret that he did not write to me during those years; though probably no written words of mine could have been of any avail in arresting him: but I have occasionally found, in life, that the truth, though discarded at the time, will come back at some unexpected moment and give the devil the lie. Now the devil had it all his own way with Dunblane for years. His father, to whom I think he was really attached, was dead; his

uncle, whom he disliked and feared, would not die. The uncle, I am told, proposed this marriage to him, and though Dunblane was indifferent—or more than indifferent—to the lady, he consented to marry her. This was the fatal error which nothing could retrieve. It was the first step down-hill, after which the descent became more and more rapid every year.

In 1803 Lord Dunblane did, at last, die, and a few months later, my own father's death recalled me to Aberdeen, where I took his place as head of the house. One day, about a year after my return, George Pilson (you remember Pilson and Pilson, the attorneys? very respectable firm,) was in my office, and chanced to speak of Dunblane Castle, where he had lately been. His father, I found out, was Lord Dunblane's man of business; and I questioned George as to his lordship's present condition and mode of life. His answer was far from satisfactory.

"His lordship's strangeness, and his violent ebullitions of temper have increased very much upon him of late," he said. "It is supposed that this is greatly owing to the fact that after nearly eight years of marriage there is no heir to the title. Then his wife is a person singularly unsuited to him in all ways. Her ladyship is handsome, but wanting in common-sense, garrulous in the extreme, laughing immoderately in and out of season, and if I may be allowed to express an opinion on such a point, deficient in the dignity befitting her station. These things are perpetual blisters, I fancy, to his lordship. Her ladyship, in a word, is what may be called a 'provoking woman,' and as his lordship is not the most patient of men you may guess the consequences."



I replied that I was more sorry than surprised: from what I knew of Lord Dunblane I never expected that such a marriage—one purely of interest—could turn out well. “And yet,” I added, “if he had fallen into other hands, I think he might have become a very different man. There were germs of good in him.”

At this George Pilson remained silent for a few moments, a silence which I thought most eloquent. He then proceeded to speak of the castle, which he described as one of the finest monuments of the fifteenth century remaining in the country.

“His lordship is very justly proud of it,” he said, “though with his pride is mingled a certain superstitious awe, as, no doubt, you know? I dare say he has often spoken to you of the secret room in the castle.”

“No,” I replied, “I do not remember that he ever did. What is there special about this room?”

He replied, “No one knows exactly where it is except the owner, the heir, and one other person; who happens, at present, to be my father. The family superstition concerning this room is very strong, and I believe they shrink from speaking of it.”

“But what does it arise from?” I inquired.

He said, “The legend runs that some former Lord of Dunblane sold himself to the devil in this room; the plain English of which is, I imagine, that he committed some foul crime there. At all events, this room has remained shut up for centuries; and it was predicted by one of those sibyls, who were given to utterances, that, if ever the secret were made known the ruin of the house would follow.”

"Why," I exclaimed, "this is the second prophecy that has been made about the Dunblanes! One pays dearly for belonging to these great families if one is to be subject to all these superstitions. Do you know if the room is ever opened?"

"Yes, I believe so, once a year; when, if possible, the three who are in possession of the secret meet here. My father never speaks on the subject, of course, nor does Lord Dunblane."

I asked who the heir-at-law was. He told me they had had difficulty in finding him out. He was in some office in London, and in very poor circumstances, being descended from a younger branch of the Dunblanes, who had gone to settle in England in the beginning of the last century.

After some further conversation, Pilson took his leave, and I thought very little more about Lord Dunblane and his affairs, having concerns of my own which fully occupied my thoughts at that time.

Some weeks later I received, to my surprise, a letter from Lord Dunblane, saying that he had just heard from his man of business, Mr. Pilson, that I was returned from India, and living in Aberdeen; and that it would give him great pleasure to see me again, if I would pay him a visit to Dunblane Castle. He named a day when he was expecting a party; but added that if this time was not convenient to me, I could write myself, and propose some later date. It would have been ungracious to have refused such an invitation. Indeed, I was fully sensible of the honour, though I anticipated but little pleasure from this visit, under the present circumstances. A press of business retained

me in Aberdeen just then, but I promised to write, and I did write, some weeks later to his lordship, proposing to accompany Mr. Pilson, who informed me that he was going to Dunblane Castle: for I reflected that as the stage would take me no further than Nairn, we could share a post-chaise together, which would lighten the cost of a journey, in which business had no part. His lordship replied, in a few lines, to say I should be welcome; and accordingly, on the tenth of April, 1804, Pilson and I left Aberdeen by the stage, which started at 6 A.M., and reached Dunblane Castle late that afternoon. It was getting dusk as we drove up to this magnificent remnant of the feudal age—a pile which impressed one with a sense of the power which must have belonged to the Dunblanes in past ages, and heightened their claim to consideration, in my eyes at least, more than the finest modern palace could have done. It was the grandest specimen of this style of architecture I ever saw, of vast extent, its sky outline bristling with pointed turrets, its grey walls crowning a steep height covered with venerable Scotch firs, a dry moat surrounding it, and a gateway leading into a courtyard, which occupied nearly an acre, and round which the castle was built.

Lord Dunblane met us in the hall. The nine years which had elapsed since we had parted had wrought changes in us both, no doubt; but in the man I saw before me I should scarcely have recognised my fellow-student had I met him in the streets of Aberdeen. He was grown very large, and on his face, which was lined far beyond his years, the hard, wild look which had been transient formerly, had settled down, apparently, into its habitual expression. He received me kindly,

but there was no smile, as he shook my hand. The light had died out of the face, never to be re-kindled. He told me I should have but a dull visit, he feared. "Had you come six weeks ago when I wanted you, you would have met a country gathering: not that I like that sort of thing: I hate it; but you and I were always very different, Carthews. Now you will find no one; and I have a good deal of business with Mr. Pilson, so that I must leave Lady Dunblane to entertain you." I assured him that I should be perfectly happy, exploring the beauties of the park and adjoining forest, and begged him not to consider me for a moment. After that he led me up-stairs to the drawing-room, where Lady Dunblane was seated alone.

The first impression produced on every one by her ladyship's beauty could not but be favourable. She was a brunette; tall, with lively eyes and brilliant teeth, which she showed a great deal when she laughed, and dark brown hair, cut short and dishevelled in loose waves over her head. Upon this occasion, however, I saw nothing but a curl or two; for she wore a species of helmet, much affected, as I afterwards learnt, by women of condition, in that day, whose husbands commanded regiments of yeomanry, as did Lord Dunblane. Being the first head-gear of the kind which I had seen, its singularity struck me; but her ladyship carried this curious erection of buckram, fur, and tinsel, with a grace which forbade a thought of ridicule. Her beautiful figure was set off by a spencer of scarlet cloth, and a tight-fitting skirt of some white material which appeared to have been damped; it clung so close to her person. It was evident that her ladyship was not neglectful of her appearance, nor unmindful of

the impression she made upon even a humble individual like myself. She came forward and greeted me with infinite suavity, saying:

"It is amiable of you, Mr. Carthews, to come and take pity on our solitude. We see no one from one week's end to another in this castle of Otranto (you have read Mr. Walpole's romance?), where all is so gloomy and mysterious that, as I tell my lord, I am really alarmed sometimes at the sound of my own voice!"

"I wish that occurred rather oftener," muttered his lordship. She continued, laughing, "Our only society are the ghosts. You don't mind them, I hope? They are all of the oldest families, for we are mighty select here, you must know. If they visit you, you must esteem it a great honour, Mr. Carthews."

I replied in the same strain, that I felt myself to be wholly unworthy of that honour; but that, if they came, I would try and receive them with becoming courtesy.

"Like my parrot," cried her ladyship, laughing. "He and my spaniel sleep in my room; and sometimes, in the dead of night, he calls out, 'Pray, come in, and take a chair!' which startles me from my sleep, and frightens me out of my senses!"

His lordship said something about her having no senses to be frightened out of, I believe, and something about "brutes." She caught up the word, with a laugh.

"Brutes? Oh, yes; one gets accustomed to the society of brutes of *any* sort, when one has nothing else all day."

Such amenities passed between the two were of constant occurrence, I suppose, for they produced little effect beyond deepening the scowl on his lordship's face. As to me, I felt very uncomfortable, and the charm of Lady Dunblane's beauty had already melted away. Though not a stupid woman, I saw that she was a very foolish one. How she dared to aggravate a man of such a temperament as her husband's amazed me. It was just like a child handling fire. She rattled away and laughed all that evening with little intermission. Lord Dunblane scarcely opened his lips. Over the wine Pilson and I talked; but his lordship stared moodily at the fire, and said nothing. I began to think I had made a mistake in coming all the way from Aberdeen for this. To play the part of chorus to a matrimonial duet of the most discordant character was not pleasant; and if my former friend was so self-absorbed as to be unable to speak to me, the sooner I left him the better. I suppose something of this sort struck him, for he said, as he wished me good night, "You must not mind my silence and absence of mind, Carthews. I am very glad to see you here; but my present position gives me many anxieties. I am irritated and worried until, by heaven! I feel at times as if I should go mad."

Well, I went to bed, and slept soundly. I never was an imaginative man, you see, or the room I was in might have conjured up some of those spiritual visitants her ladyship had joked about, evidently to her lord's annoyance. Not that it was any worse than the other rooms in the castle. I take it they were all oak-panelled, with hideous family portraits grinning from the wall upon the occupants of the vast draperied beds,

in one of which I slept without waking, until the servant brought in my hot water for shaving. It was a bright morning, and at breakfast I found my host in better spirits than he had seemed the previous evening. I could not help speculating whether this could be in consequence of Lady Dunblane's absence. She never came down to breakfast, I found. Her maid, a most formidable-looking female, with red hair, and the muscles of a gillie, came in, I remember, with a tray, and took her ladyship's chocolate up to her. This person, I was afterwards told, had been born on the estate, and was devoted to Dunblane. She had been ill spoken of as a girl; but Dunblane's mother had befriended and made this Elspie her body servant, and Dunblane had insisted, when he married, on her filling the same office to his wife, much to that lady's annoyance, who wished for a modish waiting-woman from Edinburgh or London. So much for this ill-favoured specimen of her sex, to whom I never spoke in my life, but who impressed me very unfavourably whenever I saw her. After breakfast his lordship took me over the castle, and gave me all the historical associations connected with it, showing me, with great pride, the bed in which Queen Mary had slept; a yew tree, said to have been planted by Robert Bruce; and the suit of armour borne by Dunblane of Dunblane at the battle of Bannockburn. He dilated on the glories of his house with more animation than I had yet observed: then suddenly the cloud came over him. "And to think," he said, "that all this must pass into another line—into hands that have been debased by trade" (which was not polite to me; but he entirely forgot my presence for the moment, I am sure); "to think that

people who have hardly a drop of old blood in their veins, who have intermarried for generations with Smiths and Browns, and plebeian names of that kind, should come to inherit *this*, which they have no feeling for, no pride in—by G—d, it is enough to wring one's heart!"

And this was the way he went on, from time to time, bursting out in imprecations on his fate in having no heir, and upon the evil star which had risen over his house. It was in vain that I pointed out that he was young still, and in good health, and must not abandon hope. He shook his head gloomily. "The prophecy is against me: it is no use.

'When five Dunblanes have had no son,
Then shall the line direct be run.'

It is clear enough, is it not? I am doomed. I should have known it. When did such a prophecy ever come wrong? What a cursed fool I was to marry!"

So I thought; to marry, that is to say, as he had done; but I abstained from saying so. By-and-by his lordship took Mr. Pilson to his study, where they were engaged for some hours over business; and I was left alone to ramble about the castle, inside and out, as I would.

Remembering the story I had heard of a secret room, I counted all the windows outside, and then, returning to the castle, traversed every passage, mounted every turret, and opened every door I could, to see if the number of windows corresponded. With the help of the serving man whom I met on the stairs, and who knew all the rooms in the castle, he said, I accounted for each window satisfactorily. And after two hours'

diligent endeavour to solve this mystery, I arrived at the conclusion that there could be no room—it was all humbug. I was at a time of life, you see, when over-confidence in one's own powers is apt to lead one to very false conclusions.

At luncheon Lady Dunblane appeared, and an incident, which left a painful impression on my mind, took place on that occasion. Dunblane had a peculiar aversion to her ladyship's spaniel. Strict orders were given that he was to be confined to her ladyship's own suite of rooms, and on no account to be allowed beyond them. But some door had inadvertently been left open, and, while we were at luncheon, the spaniel ran barking into the room, round and round the table, and finally straight between his lordship's legs, who was at that moment smarting under one of his wife's sallies. He roared out in a voice of thunder:

"How often have I told you, ma'am, to keep that infernal little beast in your own room?" and he kicked out so viciously, that he sent the poor animal spinning along the oak floor to the further end of the room, where he lay howling. His mistress ran up, and seized him in her arms; the creature's leg was broken. Her ladyship shrieked, and stamped, and my lord swore; and, thoroughly sickened with the whole scene, I rose and left the room. Pilson joined me in the hall.

"What is to be the end of all this?" I said to him.

His answer was, "I am afraid to think."

"Lord Dunblane," I said, "seems to me to be losing all self-restraint. If he goes on thus, what will become of him?"

Pilson looked round him, then leaned forward and whispered, "He will end his days in a madhouse." Dunblane shut himself into his room for the rest of the afternoon. By-and-by her ladyship drove out in her coach and four, and carried her dog in her arms to a veterinary surgeon some miles off. At dinner she appeared in as brilliant spirits as ever. How much of this was real I cannot say; nor, supposing her hilarity to be assumed, whether it was done for the purpose of aggravating her lord. It certainly succeeded, if so. His moroseness was enlivened by several ferocious sallies. The conversation turned upon France, I remember, and on the probabilities of the First Consul's being made emperor, a subject that engrossed all minds just then.

"How I admire that little man!" exclaimed her ladyship. "How much greater to found a dynasty, as he is doing, than to inherit all the crowns in Europe! I begin to wish I was a Frenchwoman!"

"I begin to wish you were!" cried my lord. "There is not another British peeress who would disgrace herself by uttering such a sentiment."

She laughed aloud, and replied, "Oh! because they are less frank than I am. All women admire Le Petit Caporal in their hearts. What fun it will be if he comes over here, and conquers us! It will be much nicer being the subjects of a great hero, instead of the subjects of a mad old king, who——"

"Hold your tongue, ma'am!" shouted Dunblane, bringing his fist down upon the table with a force which made the glasses clatter: "or, if you will talk your low treasonous rubbish, go and talk it in the kitchen. You shall *not* talk it here!"

She only laughed in reply. She certainly seemed to take a delight in provoking him; and, as she knew his sensitive points, this was not difficult. I found an opportunity, over a game of cribbage, later in the evening, of asking her why she acted thus. No doubt this was somewhat of a liberty, considering our short acquaintance; but I felt I could not remain longer in the house without trying to amend matters.

"Oh!" she said, "anything for a little excitement in this horribly monotonous life. I should die of ennui if it wasn't for the tiffs with my lord."

I told her she did not know what harm she was doing; and I asked if she never felt afraid of irritating a man so passionate as his lordship.

"Bless you, no," was her reply. "It is he who is afraid, *really*, of me—of my tongue, you see. Ha, ha! No one ever answered him before; his mother, his servants, his friends,—why,—you yourself, I dare say, you never contradict him? Now, I *always* do, and I always say just what I like. He hates me, of course, but he is afraid of me, Mr. Carthews. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good heavens! I thought to myself, and these two people are tied to each other for life. Both have a fair chance of living for the next forty years. What a prospect!" Even before we separated for the night she had stung him with another of her irritating speeches. There had been some talk of the steward's boy, who had tumbled from a tree, and had broken his leg. . . . "Children are a horrid bore," said Lady Dunblane. "Thank Heaven, I have no brat to be tumbling from trees, and worrying one's life out."

I dare say she did not mean it. It is hardly pos-

sible that, under the circumstances, she could not have wished for a child. The devil was in the woman, constantly prompting something to aggravate her husband. His back was towards me, on this occasion, and he said nothing, so I could only judge of the effect produced upon him by his instantly lighting a chamber candlestick and leaving the room. We saw him no more that night.

The next day and the day following only further developed the hopeless condition of affairs between Lord and Lady Dunblane. I tried once to speak to him on the subject, but I found it was in vain. An ineradicable hatred of his wife had grown up in him, which he did not attempt to conceal. When alone with him he would occasionally converse; in her presence he seemed to be perpetually on the look-out for what might drop from her irrepressible tongue. The fourth day of my stay at the castle—the day before I was obliged to return to Aberdeen—arrived, and with it came a guest, who, although expected, was evidently anything but welcome. This was Mr. James Dunblane, the heir-at-law, who had only lately been traced, and between whom and Lord Dunblane certain communications had been passed by letter. This was his first visit to the castle—a visit which, as I afterwards learnt, was a matter almost of necessity. He seemed to feel the awkwardness of his position. I do not remember much about the young man, except that he was plain in person, and very quiet. Lord Dunblane received him coldly, but politely. Lady Dunblane, after the usual fashion, plunged at once into the subject of all others his lordship shrunk from any notice of.

“So you are come, as heir-at-law, to be let into

the secret of this famous room, are you? Why, it is as bad as being made a freemason! Can you keep a secret, Mr. Dunblane? because, if not, untold misfortunes are to befall us." And the laugh with which she concluded sounded to me like the screech of an owl foreboding evil. Lord Dunblane looked as if he could have stabbed her, but he only muttered an oath under his breath, and clenched his fist—a movement which no one saw but myself. Every incident of that evening is fresh in my recollection. I remember how she returned again and again to that subject, as though it had a fatal fascination for her, but more likely, I fear, because she saw that her husband writhed under it. She ridiculed the prophecy, and laughed at all those superstitions, which his lordship cherished as his religion. It was distressing to watch him the while. He was far quieter than usual, scarcely spoke, but sat, his arms crossed, staring at the fire, with eyes which burnt, themselves, like coals, and when he swore, which he did once or twice, it was in a suppressed voice, contrasting strangely with his usual violence. But there was a vibration in the tone which showed how strongly he was stirred. At last, it was late in the evening, and we were sitting round her ladyship's tea-table, when she committed her crowning act of folly by offering to lay a wager with any one that she would find out the secret room herself. I need hardly say no one accepted the challenge. But she was not to be discouraged. She had seen her husband's face go white, and the look which he had shot at her gave a zest to her audacious scheme. She repeated her declaration that she would penetrate this wonderful mystery. Such things were well enough to frighten old

women with in the middle ages, but how any one could believe in predictions and other rubbish of this kind in the present day passed her comprehension. For her part she had no faith in anything of the kind, and to prove what folly it was, she should leave no stone unturned to discover this room about which such a fuss was made: after which the secret, she declared, should remain one no longer. I tried to stop her; Pilson tried to stop her: it was all no use. She had got the bit between her teeth, so to speak, and away she went, partly to show off, and partly out of spite, regardless what she said, provided it produced an effect and inflamed my lord yet more. She pictured, laughingly, the cob-webbed condition of the room, and how she would turn in the housemaid with broom and duster; after which she would give an evening party there, and invite all the ghosts to come, if they choose—"indeed the black gentleman himself!" Poor woman, she little knew what she was invoking. No one laughed. Even the heir, who, being shy, always smiled when required, looked too stupefied to comply with the demand on this occasion. To glance at Lord Dunblane's face was enough to check any inclination to hilarity. I have never forgotten its expression. I had witnessed his ungovernable passion scores of times, prompting him to sudden acts of violence. But now, there was a certain admixture of *fear* (she had divined rightly, I saw, when she said he was afraid of her) with the rage which trembled through his whole frame, the like of which I have never beheld but once since in my life. I saw a beast-tamer enter the hyenas' den at the show last year. The aspect of their malignant fury cowed by terror, but watching for its opportunity

to burst forth, the savage hissing wherewith they received the lash and showed their fangs, recalled to me Dunblane's demeanour as he listened to his wife. . . . At last, I could stand it no longer, and made up my mind to tell a lie.

"Lady Dunblane," I said, "like most Scotchmen, I am a trifle superstitious. This is my last night under your hospitable roof, and I am sure you would not willingly disturb its rest. You are so happily constituted as to be above fear of *any kind*. Others are weaker. Let me earnestly advise you to leave all the superstitions connected with Dunblane Castle alone. Believe me, 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your ladyship's philosophy.'"

She burst out a-laughing, as usual. "Oh, Mr. Carthews, I am ashamed of you. But I see what it is. You are afraid, not of the ghosts and the predictions, but of my lord. Well, I shall see you in May, when I pass through Aberdeen on my way south, and I shall tell you all about it then; for, depend upon it, I shall have found out the secret by that time."

And so, in the insolence of youth and high spirits and an indomitable will, she bade me good-night, poor woman, and I never saw her again.

Dunblane had left the room. Whether it was pre-arranged that Pilson and the young heir were to join him in his study, and that later in the night the door of the secret room should be unclosed, I know not. I am inclined, from one or two circumstances, to think that it was so; but, again, there are other things which have made me doubt it. At all events, when we three bade each other good-night, neither Pilson nor young Dunblane dropped anything which should

lead me to suppose they were not going straight to their own rooms. They were not to leave the castle till the day after me. It was quite possible, therefore, that the chamber was to be unlocked after my departure.

I slept soundly during the first part of the night. But about three o'clock I woke suddenly—I might almost say, I started from my sleep. I had not been dreaming; I was not conscious of having heard any noise; but my sleep, somehow or other, was broken suddenly, and I sat up in my bed with a sense of undefined alarm. I listened: all was still; the sighing of the wind among the Scotch firs below the rampart wall was the only thing I heard. But, feeling restless, I jumped out of bed, went to the window and opened it. There was no moon, but it was a light night. I could distinguish the ivy on the wall beneath; the little door in the angle of the turret opposite, and the dusky forms of the owls that flew past the window. Almost immediately beneath it was a curious old well said to be of wonderful depth, but long since unused. If one dropped a stone in there an interval which seemed like half a minute elapsed before a faint splash told that it had reached the bottom.

I had been at the window a few minutes when the door in the turret opposite opened, with a slight grating sound which attracted my attention. A figure glided forth, and ran swiftly towards the well. I distinguished that it was a woman by the long drapery, and as she came under the window I could just make out that she carried some sort of vessel in her hand. Whatever it was she threw it in, and waited, leaning over the side, until she caught the distant thud of the

object as it met the water. Then she returned rather more leisurely than she had come, the door was shut, and, though I waited at the window a full hour, I saw and heard no more.

I do not know that at any other place, at any other time, this circumstance would have aroused my curiosity. As it was, I could not get to sleep again for thinking of it, and speculating what could have been the motive that induced any female of the establishment to rise in the dead of night in order to cast something into the well.

I had to be stirring very early, and I was at my solitary breakfast when Lord Dunblane entered. He looked ghastly, so much so, that I could not help asking if he was ill. He turned fiercely round upon me, demanding why I asked.

"Because you look as if you had not slept," I said.

"And you? pray how did *you* sleep?" he inquired, knitting his brows. "You were not disturbed? You had no nightmare after Lady Dunblane's conversation last night?"

I had resolved to say nothing of what I had seen, and replied that I had rested pretty well. I was then proceeding to express my thanks to him for his hospitality, when he interrupted me. "If you wish to show yourself a friend, say as little as possible about your visit here to any one. I am going abroad at once. I have made up my mind that Lady Dunblane can live here no longer. You have heard enough to know how she hates the place—and it disagrees with her, moreover. She has had several epileptic attacks—a severe

one this very night; it is evident that the climate does not suit her, and I am recommended to take her to Italy. My lady and I can never agree here. She does all she can to goad me to madness—and perhaps she has succeeded: who can say? People will gossip, Carthews, when we are gone. Prove yourself a friend, and say nothing about our quarrels while you have been here.”

I was a good deal surprised at the tenor of this speech, but thought it reasonable upon the whole. There was something in his eye, nevertheless, which disquieted me. Coupling it with Pilson’s words, two days previously, and with my own observations, I could not avoid the conviction that the fate to which he himself had just now alluded was imminent. It might be warded off, perhaps, by change of scene, and the removal of the causes of irritation; but it was impossible to look at him steadily and to doubt that incipient insanity was there. I begged him to act upon his determination of going abroad without loss of time; and then, shaking his hand, I stepped into the chaise, and drove off.

Well, I returned to Aberdeen; and some days after this Pilson called on me. I asked what news he had of Lord and Lady Dunblane.

“They are gone abroad. I suppose it is the best thing he could do. Her Ladyship had a succession of such severe fits that she was unable to leave her room, or to see any one but her maid after you left. I *did* see her once at the window, and her look quite alarmed me. His lordship was much calmer, but he scarcely spoke. His wife’s sudden prostration, after all their

violent bickerings, affected him a good deal. He is in a bad way, I think, Carthews. I mean that I am very much afraid"—and he pointed significantly to his head.

I told him that I fully shared his apprehensions, and then asked him more particularly to describe the change in Lady Dunblane's appearance.

"The morning I left I was walking round the rampart when I heard one of the windows rattle. I looked up, and there was Lady Dunblane, her head pressed against the panes, and with such a terrible expression of agony in her face as I shall never forget. She kept opening her mouth and making the most hideous grimaces at me, so that it was clear that she was not quite in her right senses at the moment. She disappeared suddenly."

"Did you ever see any indication of a tendency to such a malady in her ladyship?" I asked.

"No. I cannot say I ever did," he replied.

"Was no doctor sent for?"

"Yes, the country apothecary came once."

"And what did he say? Did you speak to him?"

"Yes. I saw him in the hall as he was stepping into his buggy. I asked how he found her ladyship. He said she was much prostrated by the violence of the attack, but he seemed a puzzle-headed fellow. No doubt he was awed by the honour of being sent for to the castle; for I could not get much out of him. He seemed dazed; but muttered something about change being good for her ladyship."

"And who attended her during these attacks?" I inquired.

"No one but his lordship and the maid Elspie. My lord told me that his wife was very violent; but he would not suffer any of the men to be sent for, to hold her. He and Elspie, who is a very powerful woman, managed her between them. He said that he had found it necessary to tie her hands. I do not envy him his journey. They left in the family coach an hour after our departure, and were to travel night and day to Leith, where they took ship for Holland."

He then went on to say that the young heir-at-law had returned to London much depressed with his visit, and that the necessary formalities having now been gone through (which I understand to mean that the secret of the haunted room had been duly communicated to him), Mr. Dunblane would in all probability never see the castle again during my lord's lifetime.

I seldom saw Pilson for some time after this conversation; when I did, he told me what little he knew of the Dunblanes; but months often elapsed without his having any direct communication with my lord, and even then the letters he received were mere bald statements and inquiries, exclusively upon matters of business. These, however, were sufficient to show that his mind had not given way; they were lucid and perspicuous in every detail. There was never any mention of her ladyship, for the obvious reason, as it transpired after a while, that she and my lord were separated. He was travelling now in Italy, now in Hungary, now in the East, while she remained—no one knew exactly where—in Switzerland. At the end of the third year he returned to Dunblane, and shut himself up there, refusing to see any of the neighbours who called. In reply to every inquiry for her ladyship

(more especially those which a distant cousin, her only relation, made about this time), he stated that her ladyship's health obliged her to remain on the Continent; her mind had been much weakened by continued epileptic attacks, and she was unequal to correspondence. He stated, further, that she was under excellent medical care, and that though, by reason of the excitement under which she sometimes laboured, it was not deemed advisable that he should visit her often, he made a point of doing so once a year. This statement seems to have been considered satisfactory. Lady Dunblane's friends—and she had very few—were not suspicious; and the world at large troubled itself but little with the domestic concerns of a couple who had lived in isolated grandeur, with rare exceptions, since his lordship's accession to the title. Pilson went twice to the castle, during that year, and, as far as I know, he was the only guest. He gave a gloomy picture of the solitary man shut up in that big place. We both avoided all mention of her ladyship's name; but I now know that he was no easier than I was on that head.

It was towards the close of 1808 that he called on me one morning, at an unusually early hour. His face, his whole manner, betokened that my grave, quiet friend, was unusually perturbed. He looked round the room—this very room were we are sitting—drew his chair close to mine, and said in a whisper:

“Carthews, I have come to you in a very distressing emergency. I hardly know whether I am justified in taking this step, but I do know that I can depend on you, and you may materially help me in a most painful and difficult situation.”

Without much ado, he then proceeded to say that a young Frenchman, who gave his name as Jean Marcel, had called upon him the previous night, stating that he had lately come from Geneva, where he was in a wine merchant's office, and had been sent on business to Aberdeen. He was the bearer of a small crumpled note, addressed in nearly illegible characters, to M. Pilson, Attorney, Aberdeen. He stated that he had come by it thus. Shortly before leaving Geneva, it had been his duty to inspect the "recolte" of various vineyards: among them one belonging to the Château d'Osman some miles distant. The house itself was tenanted by an English lady, who was said to be mad or imbecile. At all events she was never heard to speak, and was closely watched by her attendants night and day. She walked on a terrace overlooking the vineyard, but it was never out of sight of a gaunt woman, who was, no doubt, her keeper. The intendant of the estate, who told Jean Marcel these particulars, walked through the vineyard with him, when they saw the unhappy lady on the terrace above. Her appearance had much interested Marcel. He described her as a handsome woman, but with a fixed, woe-begone expression of face, and wearing a black cloak, which entirely concealed her person. In the course of Marcel's inspection, they stood for some time just under the terrace wall, and he spoke to the intendant of his approaching voyage to Aberdeen. There was no doubt but that he was overheard by the lady on the terrace. She disappeared, but a quarter of an hour later, while they were still near the wall, the two men heard the sound of a running footstep upon the terrace, followed by a plaintive moaning, like that of a wounded bird.

They looked up, and there she stood, glancing round with an expression of terror to see if she was followed, and of earnest supplication towards the two men beneath. She opened her mouth wide—a clear proof, the intendant seemed to think, of the poor creature's imbecility—then raised both arms up high, when, to his horror, he perceived that she had lost her right hand. With her left, she then suddenly dropped over the wall a paper with a stone inside, and had scarcely done this, when her gaunt attendant appeared upon the terrace. The poor lady's whole demeanour changed; the old fixed look returned, and she began once more, with slow uncertain steps, to pace the terrace. To gratify her, Marcel picked up the paper, and pocketed it, as he walked away. As soon as he was out of sight he examined it.

Outside was scrawled, "Pour l'amour de Dieu remettez cette lettre à son adresse." Within was the note addressed to Pilson. The intendant laughed at the affair, and tried to persuade Marcel to tear up the note. "All mad people imagine themselves to be sane, and this one no doubt wants to persuade her friends that she is unjustly confined; but you need only look at her to see that she is a lunatic."

Marcel admitted the probability of this, but he could not bring himself to destroy the paper. Whether she was mad or not, the condition of this maimed unhappy creature had aroused his compassion so deeply, that he declared the first thing he would do on arriving at Aberdeen would be to find out the person to whom this note was addressed. And he had done so.

When he had finished this strange narrative, Pilson laid before me a scrap of paper—evidently the blank

page torn out of the end of a book—on which was scrawled:

"Help! for God's sake, help! before they kill me. Oh, save me, Mr. Pilson, save me, as you hope to be saved hereafter. E. DUNBLANE."

We looked at each other for some minutes without speaking. At last Pilson said:

"If I consulted my own interest, I should remain silent, or simply enclose these lines to his lordship. Her ladyship's condition, no doubt, justifies any steps that have been taken. I cannot suspect my lord; and if he discovers that I have interfered in his domestic concerns, he will certainly take the management of his affairs out of my hands. But, on the other hand, does not humanity call for some investigation into this? I could not die at peace, remembering that I had turned a deaf ear to such a cry; but I am puzzled what to do, Mr. Carthews. It has occurred to me that you may have business connexions with Geneva, and might, perhaps, make inquiries which would not compromise you as they would me."

In other words, Pilson was anxious to ease his conscience at as little risk to himself as might be. I did not blame him; my interest was too deeply stirred for me not to follow up the inquiry with the keenest avidity. But then, as Pilson had hinted, it is true that I had nothing to lose. I promised him that I would write that very day to a correspondent at Geneva, and desire him to leave no stone unturned towards discovering the truth.

I had to wait some weeks for the answer. The commission was one the execution of which was beset with difficulties. The village pasteur, the doctor, the intendant of the vineyards, and all the neighbours were applied to, but little additional information could be gathered. At last the maire of the district was induced to investigate the case, upon representations being made to him that there existed suspicions as to the treatment which the incarcerated lady—whether insane or only imbecile—met with. After a vigorous resistance they forced an entry into the château. The sight that met them was heart-rending. The poor creature lay dying upon her bed, and but for this intervention would have been denied the last consolations of religion. When the pasteur knelt down, however, and questioned her, she only shook her head and moaned. Then, with an effort, she opened her mouth wide, and, to their horror, they perceived that *she had no tongue*.

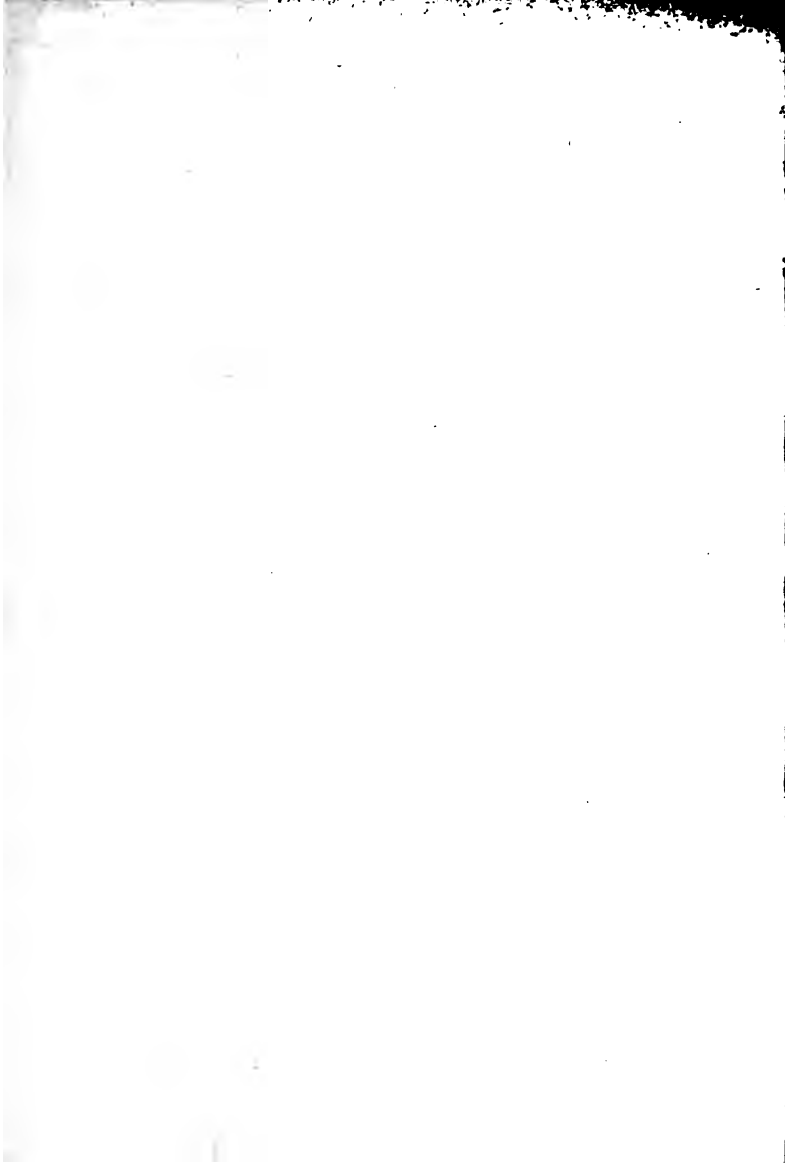
They implored her to write down the name of the perpetrator of this barbarous crime. But either she had no strength, or else she was praying, poor soul, for grace to forgive her persecutors, rather than for retribution. She listened devoutly to the good pasteur's prayers, and a glorious smile lighted up her tear-worn eyes as the death-film gathered over them. So the unhappy lady passed away. The woman Elspie was, of course, seized, and subjected to a rigorous cross-examination. She declared that the lady who was just dead had been thus mutilated by her husband one night when goaded into a state of insane rage by his wife's discovery of a secret, to which he attached a superstitious importance, and which she threatened to proclaim to all the world. In the struggle to defend

herself, her right wrist was also severed. The woman maintained that her mistress had ever since been subject to violent fits of delirium, necessitating restraint. This I do not believe; there is no proof of it whatever. How far the rest of her story was true, it was impossible to say, and will never now be known. There were probabilities in favour of it; but, on the other hand, might not this wretch herself have been the instrument? I did not forget that I had seen her (as I have now no sort of doubt) on that fatal night stealing out to throw *something* into the well. Of her complicity, at all events, there was ample proof, since, from the first, she was the attendant upon her ill-fated mistress. But the hand of justice, for all that, was stayed.

The very same day that I received the letter containing the foregoing particulars, and while Pilson and I were deliberating what steps must now be taken, the news of an appalling catastrophe, which had happened thirty-six hours previously, reached us. Lord Dunblane had been burnt in his bed, and the greater part of the castle destroyed. How the fire originated was never known, but it broke out from his lordship's room in the dead of night, and three sides of the quadrangle were burnt to the ground before the flames could be got under. The lovers of coincidences tried afterwards to make out that Lord Dunblane and his wife died the same night; the superstitious even fabricated a theory that, struck with remorse, upon learning, by second sight, of his wife's death, he had himself fired the castle, and resolutely perished in the flames. But all this is purely imaginary. It is sufficiently remarkable that these deaths should have been so near one an-

other; but Lady Dunblane died at least five days before her husband; and as to the supposition of his lordship's self-destruction, the only ground for it was his strange mental condition, which was no worse than it had been for the last four years.

The woman Elspie was set at large by the authorities at Geneva, no one coming forward as her accuser. Mr. Pilson thought, and I believe he was right, that now both Lord and Lady Dunblane were dead it was better this terrible story should not be made public. It oozed out, in the course of time, as almost all such scandals do, but not through me. It was only when I found that all sorts of false or garbled versions of the circumstances were current in society that I ever mentioned what I knew, and that was years afterwards, when, in default of heirs, the title of Dunblane had become extinct.



A STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY.



A STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY.

CHAPTER I.

"FAITES vos jeux, Messieurs." The invitation, familiar to most of us, in the dry, metallic voice of the croupier, was uttered for the hundredth time that night in the crowded gambling-room at Homburg.

A pretty woman of forty, dressed in the height and depth of the last Paris fashion,—an excellent counterfeit of a Parisian altogether, even to her very accent,—leant forward from the second rank of spectators in which she stood, and threw, with her tightly-gloved little hand, a napoleon on the table. The number on to which it rolled was as yet uncovered. The next minute, however, a young man with long flaxen moustaches, on the opposite side of the table, stretched an arm over the heads of an old Russian Countess and a distinguished ornament of the demi-monde, who were seated before him, and placed a napoleon on this same number. This occurred three times: each time the luck was in favour of these two, and against nearly every other player at the table. Had they been professed gamblers they would not have insulted the goddess who smiled on them by removing the gold each time, and continuing to stake their pitiful twenty

francs. But the lady had never seen a roulette-table before: it was her first visit to Homburg. This evening, being wet, she was induced to enter the hot, crowded rooms, and, for want of something to do, threw down her money,—that was all. The first time she won, she smiled and raked up the gold pieces carelessly. The second time she looked at the young man opposite, her companion in good luck. The third time she turned and whispered something into the ear of a tall and beautiful girl behind her. She was unlike an English girl, and, except in the matter of her clothes, unlike a French girl too; with a marvellous complexion, and strange independence of manner; listless, with sad brown eyes, and a weary little mouth, that looked as if it were sick of waiting for an interest in life that would not come. She scarcely cast her eye on the table, or heeded whether her companion lost or won. But twice, after that whisper, she glanced between an avenue of bonnets and bald heads at the young gambler opposite. And each time her eyes met his.

An old officer, a sort of military Friar Tuck, with a twinkling eye, tapped him on the shoulder.

“Potz-tausend! Lieber Waldstein! You gambling? Why, what would the gracious lady-mother say? You are the last man I ever expected to find at the tables!”

He laughed and coloured. “I have been here a month: my ‘cure’ is over, and I leave to-morrow. I have never staked a single thaler till to-night. Do you see that lady opposite?—the one in a white bonnet?”

“I should think so; and the handsome daughter.

I have been asking who they were. Friends of yours? Have a care, Waldstein! The gracious lady-mother will not hear of your casting an eye on any one but Clara, and if she learns——”

“Nonsense! Why, I don’t even know who the girl is! Never saw her till to-night; but I’ve scarcely taken my eyes off her since I came into the room. She is positively divine. Why are none of our German girls ever like that? What countrywoman is she, I wonder? You see the devil tempted me to come to the table, just by way of having an excuse for standing opposite her. I had one napoleon in my pocket, and now,—look here! I’ll hand it all over to you if you’ll find out for me who they are, General.”

“And how about my poor Clara?” said the General, with a mock sigh, and a real chuckle. “It is too bad. What would the gracious——” But here some one came between them. The General moved on, and the rest of his sentence was lost. The lady opposite, meantime, emboldened by success, had left her winnings on the table several times running, and still her luck did not desert her. Waldstein, with whom it was now a point of honour to stake as much as his unknown companion in good fortune, found himself, at the end of ten minutes, with a large pile of gold before him. The demi-monde looked up with a bland smile, and moved her chair a little to make room for him and his money. Indeed, the attention of most people round the table was directed to the extraordinary run of luck which, with scarcely a check, had been attending these two persons now for nearly half-an-hour. People began to pile their money on whatever numbers the lady backed, for she always took the

initiative. And then, on a sudden, the goddess turned away her face, and smiled on them no more. The lady bore her reverses lightly; her embroidered portemonnaie seemed inexhaustible; but when she saw the young man throw down his last napoleon, and put his hands into his pockets with an air which said plainly, "I have no more, and must e'en be content now to watch you," she drew back, and the great wave of beards and bonnets round the table closed over her.

A servant with cloaks stood at the garden-entrance of the Kur-Saal.

"It's quite an adventure," laughed the elder lady, as they walked home. "Such persistence on the young man's part! I wonder who he is?"

"I wish you wouldn't play again, mamma. I don't like it, with all those people staring at one. I felt ashamed to see that man opposite putting down his money just wherever you did, and looking at you with a smile whenever you won. It was very impertinent, I think. I hate this place. I wish we were going away. Why do you stay here?"

"Because——never mind why, my precious child. We are only just come, and having taken our apartment for a month, here we must stay."

They entered one of the large, white, green-verandahed houses on the Untere Promenade. And they did not observe a figure which had followed them at a cautious distance, on the opposite side of the road, and which now stopped under the shadow of a tree. A few minutes later Rudolph von Waldstein was examining the strangers' list in the reading room:—

Bei Herrn Strauss. Untere Promenade.

Frau Fürstin Galitzin m. Gesellschafterin u. Gefolge,
a. Russland.

Herr Fuchs u. Gattin, a. Berlin.

Herr Graf von Furstenberg m. Gemahlin u. Fam.,
a. Siegen.

Zwei Fräulein Le Gros, a. Brüssel.

Mrs. Willington, nebst Frl. Tochter u. Drsch., a.
New York, America.

Herr General Poplaws-Culloche, a. Schottland.

Frau Generalin Poplaws-Culloche, Fam. u. Beg.

The young man was puzzled. Which of these names was most likely to fit the individuals who engrossed his thoughts at this moment? Could it be the Russian princess and her companion? The two Misses Le Gros from Brussels? The wife and daughter of that Scotch general with a wonderful name,—which he owed to the compositor? They were not Germans, he felt very sure; so that he put Fuchs and Furstenberg aside. Of the other lodgers there remained the lady and her daughter from New York. Which of all these was it? General von Hanecke, who had been looking through all the rooms for the young man, entered opportunely.

“Good; here you are. And, now where is your pile of napoleons? The ladies lodge ‘bei Strauss’——”

“I know it.”

“They are mother and daughter. They arrived the day before yesterday from Paris. Their name is——”

“Willington, aus New York, America,” struck in Waldstein, promptly. “Just so. You see I have been beforehand with you.”

"All guess-work," said the General, shaking his head contemptuously, and pointing to the Fremden-List. "At all events, you have not effected an introduction, and I am promised one on the promenade to-morrow morning. What is more, I could present you, only I feel it would be treachery to that niece of mine,—the good Clara, whom you are to marry."

"Don't talk like that, General, even in joke. You know very well what I told my mother. I have the highest regard for Fräulein Clara, but—— In short, I suppose I'm not a marrying man. As to this, you are quite safe, as I leave Homburg to-morrow."

"The gracious lady-mother calls you back? My dear young friend, it is time you loosened the apron-strings a little."

"Loosened the apron-strings? What do you mean? You know I do just as I please. I hate this sort of life for long. I like nothing but the country; and so, fortunately, does my mother."

"You may say that,—hasn't left the Schloss for the last twenty years, I suppose, eh? Well, you will end by marrying Clara,—see if you don't. A good girl,—pity she's so plain,—with a good dowry. She's the very thing for you; and the gracious——"

"I tell you I'm not going to marry at all. But about this introduction. I should just like to speak to the girl if you really will introduce me. I needn't go till the afternoon train."

Of course he didn't go; and it was thus that Margaret Willington and he became acquainted. Instead of going that day, he stayed on some weeks,—as long as Mrs. Willington did,—at Homburg; and

Margaret now saw the place in quite different colours. When the end of the month drew near, she was nothing loth to linger on by the week, as her mother decided on doing. For Mrs. Willington felt more than hopeful now; she felt very certain that her primary object in coming to Homburg,—in coming to Europe at all, indeed,—was near its accomplishment. She had spared no pains in learning all that was to be learnt about Rudolph von Waldstein, and all her information had been satisfactory. Counts were as thick as blackberries; but this one was of very old family, possessing large estates on the borders of Switzerland and Germany,—a fine château, a princely fortune. He was young, good-looking, had been most strictly brought up by the mother whose only son he was, and was a model of every virtue under the sun. The combination might have seemed an impossible one to a cynic; but Mrs. Willington was not cynical. It is possible she would have submitted to have a few of the virtues docked off, provided the more substantial advantages which the young Graf possessed, had remained. Rank, wealth, fashion; these were the gods Mrs. Willington adored. She had a tolerable fortune, but she had been recklessly extravagant ever since her arrival, the preceding autumn, in Europe. A season in Paris had procured for her and her daughter many social triumphs: invitations from royalty, the homage paid to Miss Willington's beauty from a crowd of foreigners; princes and dukes, not to speak of lesser fry. But of solid, practical gain, there was none. It was very essential to Mrs. Willington's purse and purpose that her daughter should marry,—marry, that is to say, according to her views; and Margaret had not had a

single "good" proposal. She had, indeed, refused an old French banker, whom her mother had given her the option of marrying or not, as she felt inclined; but this was before Mrs. Willington had seen much of great Parisian society: her ideas expanded after that, and she felt that the banker was not to be regretted. No; a title, and an old title,—not a Brummagem one,—this was now essential to her happiness. And, like a ripe peach from the wall, without a single flaw to disqualify him for the honour of being devoured, so to speak, lo! Rudolph von Waldstein dropped into her ready grasp.

I feel that the description of such a mother, such antecedents, does not prepare one to sympathise much with the daughter; and, unfortunately, the attachment between mother and daughter was very strong. Mrs. Willington's influence over Margaret was unbounded. Had the latter been a less blindly-devoted and obedient daughter, she would have been a better and a happier woman. Her tender heart, her warm, clinging, pliable nature were very different from her mother's; but a number of the same foolish ideas, whose wide-spread branches, so to speak, overshadowed the mother's mind, had naturally shed their seed and taken root in the mind of the daughter too. The belief that the pursuit of pleasure is the main end of life had been religiously instilled into her, and vanity had been so sedulously ministered to, that it was impossible but that these should produce some fruits. That life of "unrest, which men miscall delight," afforded her little pleasure; yet she could hardly conceive of any other. Margaret had a capacity for loving strongly, and her mother was as yet the only thing she had had to love.

If she now fell into wise hands, and were removed from that mother's influence, it was not too late for the evils of her early training to be counteracted. But like a delicate creeper, clasped with the growth of years around a trellis, if she was now to be transplanted, and ever to grow firmly against another wall, it was above all things necessary to unwind her tendrils from their original support.

Six weeks after Waldstein's introduction to Margaret, this is what he wrote to his mother:—

. . . "You wonder at my long silence, best of mothers? You reproach me tacitly with my short letters, I know. I have taken up my pen daily to write to you; but the truth is, I could not write upon indifferent matters, and it was impossible to me to enter fully upon the one subject which has been occupying all my thoughts. I can do so now, however, for my mind is definitively at rest. I have taken the most important step man can take in life; and as I am confident that this step is for my own happiness, I hope very earnestly that it may meet with your approval. I am well aware that you would have wished to see and to sanction the choice of any one whom I entertained the thought of making my wife; but as this was impossible, and as I felt very certain of your cordial approbation, when you see and know my darling Margaret, I thought it better to spare you any anxiety on the subject until my fate was happily fixed. I am, indeed, a lucky man to have secured a pearl of so great price, my mother. She is the sweetest, the most angelic of creatures; and, believe me, her beauty is the

least of her attractions. She is American, and with her mother, Mrs. Willington, has only been in Europe a few months. Mr. Willington was a gentleman in business in New York, I understand, and left his widow a competence. My Margaret has no fortune; and if that be a drawback in your eyes, my dear mother, I am sure it is the only one you will be able to find. For myself, I consider my fortune enough for all my wants, and I have never desired that my wife should have money. A far more essential particular is, that she is a Protestant,—that faith in which you have brought me up, and which you hold so dear.

“Mrs. Willington leaves this for Paris in the course of a few days. I shall then come home for a short time, to see you and talk matters over, and make some necessary preparations for my Margaret’s reception. The marriage will, I hope, take place in Paris in November. I am afraid it will be in vain to try and persuade you to leave home to attend it; but we shall at once come to you after the marriage, and settle down at Waldstein for the winter.

“Let me be assured at once, my dear and honoured mother, as to your sentiments on the point wherein all my happiness is vitally concerned. Believe me, it will be the object of my Margaret’s life, as it has ever been of mine, to study your wishes in all things; and her earnest desire is that you should continue to exercise that authority in the household for which your virtues and your experience so eminently besit you.

“Dearest mother, I embrace you with dutiful and loving veneration.

“RUDOLPH VON WALDSTEIN.”

The weakness of the man was, I think, very apparent in the above letter,—the weakness that shrinks from discussion or remonstrance beforehand, and takes refuge in a bold assertion of independence, when a decision is beyond recall. His word was now pledged; his rigidly-faithful, Calvinistic mother, however displeased she might be, would never ask him to go back from it. She would have worked, and might have worked successfully, to prevent his committing this deed; but, once done, the honour of a Waldstein,—nay, more than this, the truth and loyalty of a God-fearing man,—were at stake. She would fold her hands in grim silence, and pray inwardly for her son and this Moabitish woman who had enthralled him; she would utter no complaint, he well knew. Her reply was characteristic, and contained in these few words:—

“Marriage is a solemn thing, not lightly to be entered upon. I trust thou art not so entering upon it, my son. May the Lord prosper this, and whatever else thy hands find to do! Without His blessing, what is the beauty of the flesh?—the lust of the eyes? The excellent Clara von Hanecke, whom I desired for thee, is not comely; but she is a godly young woman, and her dowry would have been serviceable to thee. So that thy wife be spiritually minded, however, it is but of small account that she be poor in this world’s goods. Yet will I not conceal that, for the sake of that vast marsh which needs reclaiming, it would be well if she had brought thee something, as Clara would have done. But the Lord has so willed it; and is not His word more than corn and oil? Therefore I say nought . . .

Since it is thy desire that I should pass the brief remainder of my days under thy roof, here will I remain. I have never been on a railroad; to undertake the journey to Paris were an impossibility. But I will wrestle with the Lord in prayer for thee, and prepare the green chamber, which has not been used since thy father's death. It is more commodious than the one thou hast hitherto slept in. The curtains, though faded, are serviceable yet I would that thy Margaret's father had not been in trade. One chief reason why thy father and I were so suitably and happily mated was that each of our families could trace a clear descent for four hundred years. Yet are we not all dust alike in the Lord's eyes? Therefore I say nought.

"My son, I press thee to my bosom,

"ELIZABETH VON WALDSTEIN (née de Germat).

"Post scriptum.—Pastor Goldfuss has been with me. He sends thee his blessing. He fears the Americans are but a lax people in spiritual things. The Lord hath seen fit to prosper the farm; our cheeses have fetched rare prices in the markets this month. Also of the vineyard the prospects are good."

It could hardly be called a cordial letter,—not so much as a kind message to Margaret; but it was all that Rudolph could hope for, and he breathed a great sigh of relief when he got it. The worst, at least, was over. He did not read the old Gräfin's letter to Mrs. Willington; but he told her and Margaret that his mother was ready to open her arms to his bride, and was already preparing a room for her reception.

Two days afterwards Mrs. Willington left Homburg for Paris, to prepare the *corbeille de mariage*, which now occupied all her thoughts; and the happy lover parted from her and her daughter at Strasburg, whence his road lay across the Black Forest to a certain solitary district, where the castle of Waldstein dominates the country round.

CHAPTER II.

"I HAVE had the green hangings turned, and the chamber is fit for a princess," said Madame Mère,—thus her son styled her sometimes,—severely.

"But, mother——" said the young Graf with some hesitation, "Margaret will require another room,—a sitting-room, you see. All women in the present day have a boudoir, and——"

"Is not the saloon good enough for her, pray? It has been good enough for me these five-and-thirty years. She will always find me there, when I am not at my devotions. What can she want of a private sitting-room?"

"Why, you see—to begin with, there—there will be her mother—— Yes," he continued more rapidly, but taking care not to look the Gräfin in the face,— "yes, Mrs. Willington is coming, you know,—for a time, at least,—and I wish every attention to be paid to her comfort. I—I desire—I think it best that she should have the tapestried room that looks south, and then the one between it and ours Margaret can have as a boudoir, when she and her mother want to be together."

This was doing the thing firmly, and he gave himself great credit for his pluck. The Gräfin Waldstein folded her hands meekly; had her son boxed her on the ear she could not have looked more long-suffering, more mildly-reproachful.

"So, then—Madame Willington—is coming—to live here?"

"I didn't say to live,—not exactly to live, mother. I don't know how long she'll stay. But, of course, being alone in the world, it is natural Margaret should wish her mother to be with her a good deal,—just at first, at all events."

The Gräfin said no more, for she was not a lady who was accustomed to waste her words, and she saw that this thing was to be. It was a great aggravation to her trials, the prospect of this intrusion of the stranger-woman's mother, who would of course try and dispute the Gräfin's authority over her daughter. She had hated the thought of this marriage from the first, but at least she had looked to have a chance of moulding her young daughter-in-law according to her own pattern. And, lo! already a formidable obstacle arose. She said no more, but heaved a sigh, which was almost a groan in its intensity. Then she drew out her spectacles, and opened a volume of "*Méditations*" at the place indicated by a marker, and appeared to forget her son's presence, and all other mundane matters, in the book before her.

The Gräfin von Waldstein was of a very old German Swiss family, nurtured in the severest school of Calvinism, which is not the religion of those parts. She was looked upon with great reverence by all right-

mind persons, being an admirable woman, whether morally or theologically regarded, who had done her duty strictly,—very strictly,—to her son, her servants, the pastor she had brought here, and the poor of her persuasion,—they were but few,—ever since the late Graf's death, eighteen years ago. She was autocratic and narrow-minded,—as who would not be whose ideas were circumscribed to one small circle, where his power was absolute? She regarded her Zwinglian and Moravian neighbours with righteous intolerance. The absence of the demonstratively religious life, of all fervid dogmatism, of that slang in familiar intercourse which has been styled "*le patois de Canaan*," were so many offences in the eyes of Madame Mère. She would have better suffered their differences had they been more objective, for one may do battle to any hard, definite body of religious opinions, and belabour them soundly; but the tendency to avoid discussion, to set aside all outward signs of devotion, to use Faith solely as a spring of life and strength in the performance of duty,—this was miserable, unsatisfactory work. The Gräfin had very little intercourse with her neighbours in consequence. Her habits had become German in the course of all those years, but her faith was the faith of her youth, unmitigated—nay, harder and firmer than ever. She was not an unkind, nor a stupid old woman; she possessed considerable clearness of perception, as may have been already gathered, and that mysterious power of "management" against which most men struggle vainly. She did, and liked doing, a vast number of charitable things; but it was in her own way, with a pious tyranny, which was sometimes galling to the recipients of her bounty. She was white-

haired, and rather infirm now; but had none of those ineffable charms of voice and expression which make old age sometimes the rival of childhood in attractiveness. She was generally dressed in a coarse black stuff, with a thick white cap, not very much unlike a night-cap,—if I might be permitted to say so,—tied under her chin; a book under her arm, and a large heavy bunch of keys hanging at her side. Let it not be supposed that because she was a Gräfin she was not a most vigilant housewife, devoting what time she had to spare from the study of eternal punishments in store for the unregenerate, to the mending of linen, the auditing of farm-accounts, the preserving of fruits, and the careful entry of market returns. The little town of Waldstadt, over against the Schloss, at the foot of the hill,—which was one great vineyard,—had its weekly market, and so had two other towns a few miles distant, one of these being on Swiss territory; so for the products of the Waldstein estate there was always a plentiful demand.

It had been a great disappointment to Madame Mère,—as may have been already gathered,—that her son, for the first and only time in his life, had stubbornly resisted her in the matter of that marriage upon which she had set her heart. The Fräulein von Hanecke was one of the ladies-in-waiting to the Queen of Würtemberg. She was an orphan, and possessed a pretty little fortune. She was of curiously old descent, and her rigid education in the Calvinistic faith pointed her out in a special manner as a fitting person to be the daughter-in-law of the Gräfin Waldstein, if not the wife of that lady's only son. Unfortunately, the "hochwohlgeborne Fräulein" was not personally attractive in

the young Graf's eyes. He told his mother he was willing to do anything she wished, even to the selling of half his estate,—the value of which, by-the-bye, had been greatly over-estimated by Mrs. Willington,—and devoting it to pious and charitable objects; but this thing he could not do. He knew all Clara's good qualities, and he recognised all the advantages of an alliance which the General, her uncle, did not hesitate to say his niece was quite ready to contract. The young lady had made up her mind it would be a suitable marriage. She liked Rudolph; she esteemed him. She was one of those sensible, amiable women, who can take a dispassionate, bird's-eye view of such matters; and who, in the event of what is called a "disappointment," have far too well-regulated minds to become ill or give up the world. It was well for her that it was so. It was now two years since this scheme had first been bruited by Madame Mère, and as nothing had come of it, Clara von Hanecke still continued "Hofdame" to her royal mistress, and went cheerfully through the monotonous routine of a petty court life. Nevertheless, the Gräfin had not yet abandoned her hopes when the news of her son's engagement shivered them to the dust.

I must say a word about Schloss Waldstein. The country about it is not beautiful, but it would be accounted pretty, I think, by a stranger, unless, perhaps, he comes to it from the Swiss side. If so, he has done with rocky peak and snowy fastness, with roaring avalanches and mighty river-falls, before he gets here; and must attune himself to a lower key. Soft undulating hills, clad sometimes with the vine, sometimes with thick pine-woods; valleys where flocks and herds feed

in rich pastures to the continuous tinkling of little bells; quaint, timbered churches; with many-beamed cottages about them,—no longer the Swiss toys that are so suggestive of the Opéra Comique; here and there a ruined tower; here and there a narrow wooden bridge, that looks, with all its lateral supports thrust wide into the stream, like a monster stretching his many legs very far apart;—this, and the sudden inestimable relief from all tourists, is what he will find who wanders up to the little-known region I write of. It has nothing remarkable to attract the traveller, and near at hand is scenery with a world-wide repute; no wonder, then, that those who turn their steps this way are few indeed. A “duller” district, in the estimation of mundanely-disposed persons, it would be hard to find.

And to this district Mrs. Willington, with the vaguest views of country life in general and of a Swiss or German château in particular, was now coming. I believe she had visions of a continuous round of guests; a sort of Decameron; a throng of finely-dressed folk wandering about stately gardens, with the addition of much fiddling and feasting; and I know she ordered a great variety of clothes, which, when added to Margaret’s trousseau, she was quite unable at the moment to pay for.

“I’ve spent an awful quantity of money,” she said to her daughter just before the marriage; “and if it wasn’t that I’m going to live at Rudolph’s expense for some months to come, I don’t know what I should do. Dear delightful Paris is such a seductive place! There’s no other place worth living in,—only one ought to be made of money. What a bracelet that was we saw in the Rue de la Paix! I told Rudolph it was the very

thing for you. Do you think he means to give it you, my darling?"

"No, mamma; he told me he couldn't afford it; but that if I had really set my heart on it, he would get it,—even if it put him to inconvenience. Of course, I told him not."

"That was weak, my pet. I should have had it. It could make no real difference to him, you know. The old lady hoards money, I am told, in the most frightful way. Of course, we must introduce a change into all that. Rudolph is very dear, and nice, but he wants his ideas being a little enlarged."

"I suppose he does," said Margaret, dolefully. "He made such a fuss about my going to the Bois on Sunday. He thought I ought to go to the Oratoire again, I believe. And, mamma, I am so fond of him, that I don't think, really, I should care how often I went, if it was to please him. Only, as you say, I suppose it is better that his ideas should be enlarged. But what a noble, generous, devoted nature his is! I never saw any one half as lovable. How lucky I am, mamma!"

"Yes, dear, very. Marriage is such a lottery. Now we must be off to Monsieur Worth's, or your things won't be ready for next week."

Early in November they were married, with a pomp which Waldstein would willingly have avoided, but which nothing would induce his mother-in-law to forego. And immediately after the ceremony, contrary to all English conventionalities, the young Count and Countess set off for their home, accompanied by Mrs. Willington.

The day they reached Schloss Waldstein had been one of constant rain, and perhaps it was as well that they arrived long after dark; though the laurel arch, with "Wilkommen" in gilt letters thereon, was consequently invisible to those for whose honour and benefit it was meant, and the peasants who had constructed it were much disappointed in consequence. But the little town looked inexpressibly dreary, with rain pouring out at the water-pipes in all directions, and uniting in one black torrent over the steep, ill-paved street; and the brown, bare vineyards beyond, seen through the soaking November gloom, were hardly more reassuring. Therefore, as far as Margaret, who was unfortunately impressionable in such things, was concerned,—not to speak of her mother,—it was as well that Waldstadt and the surrounding country were not revealed under their least favourable aspect, but that the veil of darkness covered them. The peasants and town's folk might do what they liked, of course, but Madame Mère was not going to erect triumphal arches, dispense good cheer, or otherwise expend in wasteful folly to do honour to her son's marriage the money that could more profitably be employed in pious and charitable works. So the courtyard of the Schloss was as dark as pitch,—dark and wet; and Madame Mère sat in the old yellow drawing-room, where, after some demur, she lit a couple of candles, in addition to her ordinary lamp with its green shade. That was the only outward and visible sign of welcome that awaited the bridegroom and his bride.

Margaret had been lying asleep on her husband's arm for the last half-hour. She only woke as the steps of the carriage were let down, and came in, a little

nervous, but her beautiful face all a-glow with pleasure, and threw herself into Madame Mère's arms. The latter kissed her kindly, and improved the occasion with a murmured prayer and exhortation; then she turned to Mrs. Willington, who was warming her hands at the stove, and examining with amazement the cap, the garments, the general aspect of Rudolph's mother.

"This is Mrs. Willington, liebe Mutter," said Waldstein.

"You are welcome to our home, madame," said the old lady, and held out a homely, unringed hand. Mrs. Willington put the tips of her Jouvin's glove, with its four buttons and the cascade of lockets falling over it, into the horny receptacle the Gräfin proffered, and smiled a galvanised smile. Then the latter, in her turn, passed her eyes with curious scrutiny over this new-comer, and sighed.

They were shown to their bed-room, while supper was being prepared.

"Good heavens! no fire in one's room in such a night as this!" cried Mrs. Willington. Then she looked for a bell; but there was none,—none throughout the Schloss, as she soon learnt. Her remarkably penetrating voice soon brought some one to her assistance, however,—her maid superintending the right allotment of sundry huge trunks to the several rooms,—and then Madame Mère was informed that Mrs. Willington demanded fire. Margaret did not demand it, though, to say the truth, she was shivering in her room; but, then, she had a Rudolph, and her mother had not; and this Rudolph, without screaming for servants, and

without a word from his wife, went and lit the stove himself.

"It is a wretched room," exclaimed Mrs. Willington, looking round. "What a bed! It's like a chest of drawers! And such a washing-stand! And as to the toilet-glass,—good heavens! half the quicksilver is gone. No carpet, too,—ugh! How I hate those horrid stoves! And I don't see any place to hang up my gowns; and—Cécile, go and ask for some candles. I can't dress with that one horrid light,—it's really too bad!"

Then Madame Mère was informed that Mrs. Willington demanded candles,—wax candles; and, raising her eyes to heaven, she unlocked the store-closet, and took out a pair with her own hands.

There was plenty of food for supper, and, of its kind, it was not bad; but to appetites accustomed to a French cuisine, heavy German dishes are a trial; and Mrs. Willington, especially, did not bear the trial well. Margaret ate what was brought to her, and tried to think it nice; for Rudolph, she knew, would be vexed if she appeared to think otherwise; but she felt as though she were almost guilty of a disloyalty to her mother all the time, who was entering a silent, but expressive pantomimic protest against one dish after another. Madame Mère made as though she saw it not; but she did see it. No movement or look of either mother or daughter escaped her. She had begun the meal with a thanksgiving, and by invoking a blessing, at considerable length, upon what they were about to eat; if Mrs. Willington was impious enough to disregard this, she, Madame Mère, was doubly bound to show that the invocation had been answered,

and she accordingly partook of almost everything at the table. She spoke but little. Rudolph talked, and exerted himself to make conversation general; but it was hopeless work,—like a game of battledoor in which every player but one lets the shuttlecock fall to the ground. Margaret did, indeed, make a feeble attempt to second him, and laughed whenever she saw an opportunity; but she felt very tired, and rather awe-stricken with Madame Mère's long prayers, and was secretly longing to be in her own room with Rudolph, where she would be at her ease. But this was not to be,—not unless she fainted outright,—for a good hour yet. No trifling excuse would have availed to spare her the long evening psalms, with two chapters from the Bible, and an exhortation, which followed the removal of supper. Mrs. Willington might yawn as audibly as she chose; she might look at her watch, and even go the length of taking off her bracelets. Madame Mère was inexorable as Fate. She would not have spared them a denunciation,—not skipped a single sentence of the wrathful homily, if their lives had depended on it.

The next morning the two ladies did not come down to breakfast, and thereby missed the morning edition of what had caused them such protracted suffering the night before. Rudolph appeared, of course, and he brought his wife's excuses. She was tired, and not yet accustomed to such early hours. Madame Mère shook her head, and murmured a supplication that the benighted young woman might be brought to see the culpability of sloth and self-indulgence. Then Rudolph took up his wife's breakfast to her with his own hands.

"I have seen poor mamma," said Margaret, plaintively, "and she is very unhappy at having no wardrobe. She says all her beautiful gowns cannot possibly remain packed up always. Mine, too, will be quite spoilt, I'm afraid. What is to be done? Do see about it, dear."

He remembered two fine roomy old oak cupboards. It was true that some shelves had been put into them, and they had been devoted to apples; but these might be taken out, and it would be better than nothing in the present exigency. Only, what would his mother say? Perhaps it were wise to have the thing done, if possible, without her knowing it? It was not to be. She came, and caught him with an old servant baling out the apples on the floor.

"What dost thou with the apples, Rudolph?"

He tried to put a bold face on it, but stammered a little when he came to the purpose for which the cupboards were wanted. The vain adornments of women! If there was one subject upon which his mother could be more severe than any other it was this. Did he not know how she would quote Saint Paul, and visit the Corinthians upon his unhappy wife? However, he had to get it out, and he did so with some attempt at pleasantry. The old lady stood aghast.

"And, pray, what are we to do with the apples?" she said at last.

"Eat them, liebe Mutter; there is nothing else for it," he replied, with a shocking effort to laugh.

The worst of it was, that his well-meant crusade to rescue these sacred places of his mother's, and hand them over to the strangers, was not rewarded with the gratitude it deserved. Mrs. Willington de-

clared that her gowns smelt so abominably of apples, that they made her sick for weeks afterwards. The subject made him sick, I know; what with the old Gräfin, upon one hand, with her Jeremiads, and Mrs. Willington with her complaints, on the other, he suffered many things because of those apples, and used to declare,—for he was driven to small jests,—that if the famous tree in the garden of Eden was really an apple-tree, he had been unfairly dealt by, for the knowledge he had of that fruit was all of evil, and none of good.

To continue the programme of this first day,—which will serve as a sample of many succeeding weeks,—Rudolph led his wife out, as soon as she was dressed, into the quaint old garden overhanging the vineyard, on the south side of the Schloss. It was a soberly fine autumn morning; the splendours of the year, its blue and gold, its emeralds and many-coloured jewels, were departed; but there was the first hint of silver frost in the air, and the tender opal of the sky, and the soft lustre of pale smoke and sunshine over the little town of Waldstadt in the valley yonder. The garden, which was in terraces, was separated from the vineyard by a low parapet wall. The angles of this wall, which were turret-shaped, held circular benches, where, of summer evenings, it was pleasant to sit and look over the great slope of vineyard, and beyond the steep, winding road, and across the valley to the fir-clad hills, so darkly green and cool. On such a morning as this, however, "*sub Jove frigido*," exercise was better than repose, and the young couple walked for an hour upon this lowest terrace of the garden. Margaret felt very happy; it was pleasant to walk thus,

with his strong arm around her, and his handsome face bent over hers, in this quaint garden under the clear autumn sky. Away from her mother, she could forget all minor troubles; with Mrs. Willington present, they stood between Margaret and contentment.

"This is better than the noise of Paris, after all, Herzchen, is it not?" he said.

"'Tis with you, Rudolph; not alone."

"It seems as if, in great cities, in great crowds, two hearts can never hear each other beat in perfect unison, for the din and turmoil round them."

It was a little bit of German sentimentality, and Margaret was not sentimental; but she liked it in Rudolph's mouth, and could understand it on this occasion. She looked up with a lovely smile.

"Nothing can prevent our hearing each other here, can it? But you're going to do everything I ask, ain't you, Rudolph? Not for me, dear,—for indeed, I feel as if I want nothing now with you,—but for poor mamma, who is making such sacrifices on my account in coming here. I couldn't be happy, you know, if she were miserable."

"I hope she will not be miserable. Why should she? My mother, I am sure, wishes—will try to do everything to make her happy. Our manner of life is very different to what Mrs. Willington is used to. We are very quiet, simple folk here, and she will have to accustom herself to the absence of society; but with you and me, Herzchen, she oughtn't to be dull, and won't be, I hope."

Margaret probably knew better; but she said nothing, and tried to dismiss the subject from her

thoughts. This was not difficult at the moment, for she felt perfectly happy while alone with her husband. But some half-hour later they were joined by Mrs. Willington.

"My dear Rudolph, when are you going to begin refurnishing the château? The state it is in is perfectly disgraceful. Margaret cannot possibly receive her friends in such a salon, with tarnished mirrors and threadbare sofas. And as to our bed-rooms, I do hope you will write off to-day, and get a tapissier from Strasburg, or somewhere, to come and make them decent. I have been thinking about it, and I have decided on having rose-colour and white for my room. What do you say for yours, my darling?"

Margaret murmured that perhaps blue would be pretty. Rudolph walked along in silence, his eyes upon the ground, his wife's hand, which he held in his, still resting on his arm.

"Of course you mean to alter this garden," continued Mrs. Willington, presently. "This arrangement is so dreadfully old-fashioned. A jardin Anglais is the thing here. Whose is that big white house on the distant hill? That looks like a rich neighbour,—and the only one, I suppose?"

"It belongs to a rich manufacturer, whose mills you see in the valley below. He is a very worthy man, but we don't associate. The distinction of classes is still kept up in this country. It is very absurd, I think, but so it is."

Mrs. Willington, whose husband had been in the wholesale oil-cloth line in New-York,—which did not prevent her having aristocratic proclivities, now that

she was allied to one of the oldest families in South Germany,—was not so opposed to class distinctions.

“Well, one must draw the line somewhere, I suppose. But what do you do for neighbours? Have you absolutely no society?”

“None, except the village pastor, and one or two old ladies, friends of my mother’s, who visit her occasionally.”

“Good Heavens!”—Mrs. Willington clasped her hands,—“and you call this existence? How can you have lived all these years in such a state of things? But you have surely had friends staying with you?”

“Occasionally a man or two from Switzerland. I was at college there, and have cousins at Geneva, moreover. Sometimes one of them comes for the *chasse* in the winter. No one else, except General von Hanecke, who lives not very far off, and sometimes rides over.”

“Ah, my dear Rudolph! we must alter all that for you. We shall have to import our society from Paris, I see.”

Again he was silent; and turning to her daughter, she went on,—

“The dear marquise and her daughter promised to come to you, you know; and so did Monsieur de Boisjelin, and several more.”

A bell here rang opportunely, summoning them, so Rudolph said, to dinner.

“Dinner at one! Good heavens! Rudolph, you don’t mean to say that you keep such barbarous hours?”

“Call the meals by whatever name you like, my dear Mrs. Willington,—they are really the same. This

is your luncheon, and our eight o'clock supper your dinner. Moreover, we have the tea and coffee of civilised life at half-past five. But my mother is old-fashioned, and does not like change, so we always keep to the old names and hours of our meals."

"Ah; people at that time of life are peculiar. Still,—how old is she? Wonderfully active."

"Yes; I am thankful to say she is, for her years. She is sixty-eight, and has a capital head for business still,—indeed, she has the enjoyment of all her faculties."

The expression on Mrs. Willington's face spoke volumes, if Rudolph could have seen it; but she said nothing, and they all entered the dining-room.

After dinner, a high and very spidery-looking vehicle, of the mail-phæton tribe, was brought to the door by a stalwart groom "bearded like the pard," and dressed in what was meant to be the true English style. Of course, Rudolph wished to drive his wife out; but it was a fine afternoon, and what was Mrs. Willington to do? Was she to be left to a tête-à-tête with the Gräfin? Rudolph thought that this was not likely to tend to the softening of either lady's sentiments; and he wished to avoid it, if possible. But what was to be done? Of course Margaret must sit beside him, and the only other place was at the back, alongside of the bearded groom. He put it to Mrs. Willington, and she hesitated. It was derogatory, no doubt; but was not anything better than being left alone in that horrid dull old house, with that dreadful puritanical old woman? She had a chance of seeing some one, at all events; and she could address an observation occasionally over the hood to the young

people in front. She elected, and wisely, no doubt, to endure the indignity; and though they saw no one in their drive but a few peasants and one "commis-voyageur," standing at the inn-door, as they rattled down the little street of Waldstadt,—Rudolph, like most foreigners, being a perfect Jehu in the fury of his driving,—yet "it was a change," as she said, "and anything is better than being alone." They passed a Roman Catholic Church, and met a couple of priests,—I had forgotten them,—a little farther on; when Rudolph explained to Margaret that the district here was not entirely Protestant, and that all religions were tolerated. She was glad to hear this; she began to have a fear that if the Gräfin's will were omnipotent there would not be such liberality on this point.

In the evening the Pasteur called to pay his respects to the young Graf's bride. He was a spare, mild-eyed man of fifty, simple-minded, ignorant of the world's ways, and "thinking no evil" of any one; shambling, tedious, voluble. He was bidden to stay supper, and sat next to Mrs. Willington, to whom he addressed himself several times, but in vain. When he asked some questions about the American Church, it was Margaret, across the table, who replied. When he expressed a hope that the elder lady had not suffered from the journey,—in the eyes of the good Pasteur, who had not been twenty miles from Waldstadt in as many years, Paris was at the world's end,—Mrs. Willington only shook her head, and yawned; it was Rudolph who came to the rescue, with some statistical account of the French railroads, and the increased traffic to Strasburg, with a good deal about "kilos," which seemed to interest both gentlemen, and

was incomprehensible to the ladies. The Pasteur's own talk was chiefly small and local, and directed principally to Madame Mère. She knitted her grey worsted stocking, even at the supper table, and discussed the temporal and spiritual needs of those amongst the Waldstadt poor who belonged to the small number of the "elect," with forcible sense and rigorous justice. But to Mrs. Willington, and indeed, it must be confessed, to Margaret, too, all this was inexpressibly wearisome. The evening ended with a lengthy exhortation from the Pasteur, and prayers in which blessings were invoked in many long-winded phrases upon the bridegroom and his bride. At the time, Margaret got such a pain in her knees that she fervently wished the blessings shortened; she remembered them years afterwards in penitence and tears.

"That old woman will be the death of me!" said Mrs. Willington to her daughter as she went to bed. "This sort of thing never can go on. You must very soon put a stop to it, my darling, if you don't wish to have my death at your door. I feel already ten years older than I did when I came here."

CHAPTER III.

As the first day at Waldstadt was, so were those that followed. The only change was that wrought by time in the relations between the two mothers-in-law, whose mutual animosity increased daily. It was a struggle for mastery, in which sometimes one, sometimes the other, had the best of it. His reverence for his mother, his own tastes and early habits, disposed

Waldstein to few changes. On the other hand, there was his passion for his wife, and, because of her, his desire to satisfy Mrs. Willington. He was a man who hated strife—indeed, turmoil of any kind; and peace, he began to see, was the one thing he could not obtain. Paris and Baden had been all very well in their way, occasionally in his bachelor days; now, to live in his Schloss from one year's end to the other seemed to him the obvious scheme of existence for married folk, to whom "the world" could offer few allurements. No doubt there would be a visit to Kreuznach now and then,—most Germans regard mineral waters as an article of physical faith,—or some such deadly-lively bath, where gambling is not, and pleasure-seekers never resort. Other years, too, there might possibly be a little tour in Switzerland or Tyrol, when he and his Margaret would see the sun rise from mountain-tops, and talk sentiment on moonlit lakes, and live the old brief love-making days over again. Such had been the prospect to which he had looked forward; and now that he drew near to where the reality should be, lo! like the Fata Morgana, the vision melted hourly away. In Mrs. Willington's presence, at least, nothing like it would ever be; and if, under any circumstances, Margaret could have been brought to accept cheerfully the conditions of life he proposed at Schloss Waldstein, she certainly never would do so as long as her mother was at her side. It was all very easy to say, as the Gräfin did not hesitate to do most decidedly, "Send her away, my son. She is an irreligious world-loving woman, who corrupts the heart of thy wife. Send her away." But loving her mother as Margaret did, accustomed, as she had been, to regard everything

with her mother's eyes, such a step would have required more force of character than Rudolph von Waldstein possessed. Mrs. Willington's complaints wearied, and her frivolity disgusted him; he generally took refuge in an obstinate silence from her dolorous or angry remonstrances. At the end of the second month he disliked her almost more than his mother did; he longed, with an unutterable longing, to get rid of her, and he did not know how to do it.

One day General von Hanecke came over. It was a blessed break in the day's monotony; he was greeted by Mrs. Willington as he never had been greeted before. She monopolised him; poured forth her lamentations in his ear; informed him, in confidence, that her daughter would certainly never submit to this life for very long; accused Rudolph of indifference to her comfort, and declared that Schloss Waldstein was little better than a prison. As to herself, she said the life was killing her by inches. Had she but known what it was, with that dreadful old woman, in whose hands Rudolph was as dough, nothing should have induced her to consent to the marriage. Why did not General von Hanecke warn her? She had been deceived, too, in fancying her son-in-law to be a much richer man than he was. The stinginess of all the arrangements at the Schloss,—the meanness of that old woman,—were beyond description. In her country, why the poorest lady would be above doing the things this countess did. It was abominable!

Under his well-fed jollity, and apparent indifference to all serious matters, the old General had a reserved stock of good sense, which, like his powder, he was always careful to keep dry. He did not waste it on

Mrs. Willington. But he took Waldstein aside before leaving, and, looking gravely in his face, said,—

“There is not room for two suns in the same heaven, lieber Freund.”

“What do you mean, General?”

“That either the gracious lady-mother or Frau Willington,—one or other,—will have to leave this house.”

“Certainly it will not be my mother,” said the Count, with a touch of heat. “No power on earth,—neither wife nor any one else,—should ever get me to turn my mother out of the home which has been hers nearly forty years.”

“Then it must be the dear bride’s mother, lieber Waldstein, and the sooner the better.”

But a month later, when he came again, she was still there; and the last state of that woman was, as he had foreseen, worse than the first. Scenes were of constant occurrence which must have worn out the patience of Job in time; and Waldstein, in spite,—perhaps because,—of his inherent weakness, it must be confessed, had an almost patriarchal measure of that virtue. His mother’s righteous wrath, his wife’s fears, Mrs. Willington’s reproaches, could not have gone on for ever. “Gutta cavat lapidem.” Some day or other, his anger mastering him, he would have turned the latter lady out of his house, I suppose. It is a pity he did not do so.

Mrs. Willington would voluntarily have withdrawn her forces long since, and have sought for consolation in the Rue de la Paix; but without remittances from America, she found herself constrained to remain where she was; and the remittances did not arrive. Crippled

by past extravagance, she must eat the Waldstein bread for the present, and wish, as best she might, for a good time coming. As to altering the state of things at the Schloss, she began almost to despair of it; but she saw a hope of deliverance,—of deliverance for herself and her daughter. Though she wisely said nothing of it, it was this hope which sustained her through the greater part of that dreary winter, passed in the reading of French novels, in correspondence with Paris and New York, in sharp verbal encounters with Madame Mère, and in stirring up her daughter to fearful discontent.

In May Mrs. Willington thought it time that her project should ooze out; for in August Margaret hoped to become a mother. One morning, therefore, finding Rudolph alone, Mrs. Willington opened the campaign, by saying,—

“Dear Margaret is looking very ill. The change in her cannot have escaped you.”

Now his wife’s pallor and dejection Waldstein had attributed, and so had Madame Mère, quite as much to that constant blister, her mother’s tongue, as to her condition.

“I understand that she should be kept as quiet and free from irritating discussion as possible,” he said.

“Ah! you may say that! I am sure it is not I who ever wish to have discussions. But if you were only as observant of her as you once were, Rudolph, you would see what it is that is preying on her mind.”

He was used to this sort of language now; he was

"The Gräfin and I are very different," sighed Margaret.

"Then think of all the poor women who, being very little cared for, are safely delivered yearly. Why should'st thou die more than they, Margaret? It is not reasonable. It is giving way to foolish fancies, which may in the end really do thee a mischief."

"It is no use arguing about it. I feel I shall die, if my baby is born here."

"It is nothing but a subterfuge of Mrs. Willington's to get thee to Paris," said Rudolph with impatience, and then added imprudently, "My mother says so, and she is quite right. It would never have entered thine own head."

"Oh, of course the Gräfin will abuse poor mamma, and lay it to her door; we are quite prepared for that."

"I think it would be much happier for us all, Margaret,—for thy mother, no less than for thee and me—if—if—if—she would go to Paris alone."

She turned full upon him, and then burst into tears.

"How can you be so cruel, Rudolph? Isn't it enough that I have no longer any influence with you now? do you wish also to separate me from mamma, and at such a time as this, too? The Gräfin hates me—of course, I know she does; and it is in her hands you want me to be when my time of trouble comes—and you would send poor mamma away. Oh, it is cruel!"

"Well, well—say no more about it, Margaret. I really suggested it as much for Mrs. Willington's comfort as our own. She seems to find it so impossible to be happy here."

Margaret dried her eyes, and nothing more was said then. All the evening he was unusually tender in his manner to her; and the next morning she got up in better spirits, and put on a new gown, which had been hanging in the apple-closet all these months.

The Gräfin lifted up her hands and eyes when she appeared.

"What dost thou wear such clothes for here, Margaret? dost thou think to please thy husband by this sinful waste upon thy vile body; and at such a moment as this, too, when thou art especially, so to speak, in the Lord's hands? what are satins and laces compared with the soul?"

"I am sure I don't know, Madame," said Margaret, humbly, seeing that she was expected to reply.

"My son, let me tell thee, Margaret, has the fear of the Lord, and the Day of Wrath and Vengeance, ever before his eyes. In that dread day——"

"Oh, please don't, Madame; don't talk like that. The gown was bought with mamma's money; but indeed I don't know why I put it on, for I don't suppose Rudolph cares—no one cares now, I think, what I wear!"

"I should hope not. We are a mass of corruption, and what does it signify what we put on? A little time and we shall be food for the worms: and how, then, Margaret, with the perils of child-bearing before thee, can——"

"Oh! pray, pray don't, Madame. I am weak and nervous, and I can't stand it,—I can't indeed. I'll put on sackcloth if you wish it."

"What ails thee? not godly sorrow for sin, I fear, Margaret; but the mere carnal shrinking from those

pains which we are born to suffer. Hast thou read the passages from the 'Commentary on the Romans' which I marked for thee?"

"No, Madame, she has not read them," said Mrs. Willington, who had entered during the last speech. "I took the book away: it seemed to me most uncomfortable reading. She would only have made herself miserable, and for what?"

"'Uncomfortable' and 'for what?'" echoed Madame Mère, literally aghast.

"Yes, for what? It doesn't seem to me, according to your doctrine of predestination, that it much matters what we do, or don't do. If we are to be saved, if we are elect, it's all right, you know; and if not, there's no use in trying, or in making oneself miserable beforehand."

"Such language is impious!" cried the old Gräfin.

"So, I think, is the doctrine, Madame," responded the American lady, imperturbably.

"Those who disbelieve it, without doubt they shall perish everlastingly."

Madame Mère gave this denunciation with great unction, and left the room. She could stand it no longer. This woman was a limb of Satan. Oh, how blind had Rudolph been, to reject that excellent, pious Clara von Hanecke, with her ancient lineage and her fifty thousand thalers, because she was a little plain, and to be caught by a weak, foolish creature, like this Margaret, without fortune or family, all along of her pretty face! It might do very well for her to insinuate to her daughter-in-law that her son was impervious to the lust of the eyes; in her own heart she knew better. Were it not so, this hateful marriage would never have

accomplished itself; and Rudolph would have yielded to his mother's wishes in espousing the good Clara. How different all would have been then!

But when she came at last to know that Mrs. Willington had conceived the idea of carrying off her daughter to Paris to be confined, and that there were symptoms of Rudolph yielding, in his love and anxiety for his wife, to this base plot, her indignation was great indeed. It was positively sinful; it was tempting Providence to chastise her heavily. Could not the Lord deliver her as safely in the wild desert, far from all human aid, as with those feeble instruments of his will, the most eminent surgeons in Europe? Nay, was it not absolutely dangerous, in her present condition, to set forth on a long railway journey in the great heats of summer? It was provoking the Lord to visit her with sundry grievous ills. These and other arguments, spiritual and temporal, she visited very severely upon Margaret and her son. With Mrs. Willington she did not vouchsafe to argue now,—giving her over to a reprobate mind beyond the reach of righteous influence. But all she said had little effect on Margaret; so eager was she to escape anywhere—anywhere, so that she could only get away; and the sight of her wan face, and the piteous manner in which she supplicated Rudolph not to insist on her baby being born at Schloss Waldstein, triumphed of course in the end over all the Gräfin's unanswerable arguments.

Towards the end of June they went to Paris, and took an apartment in the Champs Elysées. "Margaret has left that abominable hole," wrote her mother to a dear friend in New York, "and if I have any influence,

it will be long—very long, before she sets foot in it again. Count Waldstein has a good fortune, and he ought to live in Paris,—the only place in Europe to live in,—instead of mewing Margaret up in that dull, dreadful place, which was nearly the death of us both during the seven months we were there. If it wasn't for that dreadful old woman, his mother, he would be very easy to manage. As it is, now that we have got away from her, I mean that Margaret shall keep away. We shall see which is stronger, the old Gräfin or I."

CHAPTER IV.

IN the beginning of August a boy was born to the young Graf and Gräfin von Waldstein. Rudolph found himself very miserable in Paris in those days. When his natural rejoicing over the birth of a son, and the safety of Margaret, had a little subsided, he began to pine for the vineyards and farms, the pine-woods and fish-streams of his country, and to find the broiling, deserted capital,—his few acquaintances were "*aux eaux*,"—insupportable. He was told that Margaret must be kept quiet. One or two peeps of her during the day was all that his mother-in-law allowed him. He had nothing to do. He wandered to and fro upon the burning asphalt, and ate ices at every second café he came to, and went into stifling theatres to rush out gasping, and drive to the Bois for a mouthful of fresh night-air. He anathematised the fair city, and vowed that once quit of it, nothing should bring him here again for a very long time. A summons requiring his instant presence at Schloss Waldstein came opportunely,

just as his impatience at Margaret's prolonged state of convalescence and his weariness of Paris had reached their climax.

She had been confined nearly three weeks when he received a telegram one morning. His mother was alarmingly,—almost hopelessly ill. An hour later he was in the mail train on his way to Strasburg.

"God bless thee, my darling!" he said, as he pressed Margaret in his arms. "Make haste and get strong, and come back to me. I am very sad at heart. I tremble to think of my good mother,—my dear, wise counsellor. What should I do without her? I pray God I may find her out of danger."

The baby was brought in, and the father took up the little creature in his arms.

"He has your eyes," whispered Margaret with a smile. "But if the Gräfin recovers,—as I hope she soon may,—you must come back to me at once, Rudolph, for I shall be so desolate without you; and baby will grow out of your recollection if you are too long away."

There was the slightest shade crossed his brow.

"I hope to see you both at Waldstein,—thou and baby, my dearest, very soon. The mamma will, no doubt, remain here awhile. It will be too hard to force our quiet life again upon her so soon. I have only just time to catch the train. I must be off, my darling." And laying the child down, he threw his arms once more round his wife, and ran down-stairs.

In the grey of the summer's morning he drove up the little street of Waldstadt, and looked at the windows of the distant Schloss, and felt a sinking at heart.

What if he should, indeed, be too late; and it should be all over with her? What if she should have passed away without laying her hand upon his head, and giving him her last blessing? Such autocrats as Madame Mère are loved very faithfully, we see sometimes, by natures like her son's. He had passed a sleepless night, during which he had often remembered bitterly that but for Mrs. Willington he would now be at his mother's bedside. As he drove into the courtyard two of the old servants came to the door to meet him. He stretched his head out of the window: he could not speak. "The gracious lady" was better within the last few hours. He jumped from the carriage, and ran into the house. He found Strumpf, who corroborated the assurance that the gracious lady's illness had taken a favourable turn. He did not apprehend now any immediate danger, and Rudolph was ushered into his mother's room. She received him calmly, and in a voice very little weakened by illness.

"It has pleased the Lord to spare me yet a little. I was prepared to go; but His will be done. Thou did'st well to return, Rudolph; but why not thy wife? When do she and the child follow thee? The beds are aired, and there is a roe fresh killed in the larder, for I looked that they should come with thee."

He was rather startled by this sudden return to the practical concerns of life from the lips of one whom he had regarded so lately as a dying woman; and he replied, with some hesitation, "Margaret is too weak to travel at present; indeed, I was too anxious about you, mother, to make any definite arrangements for her return home."

Madame Mère justified her doctor's and her own

confident assertion that she was out of immediate danger; but her illness assumed a very grave complexion, for all that. It became apparent, after a few days, that there was organic disease, which threatened to transform the active, energetic old woman into a confirmed invalid. The powers of her mind were unimpaired, and she showed herself of wonderful courage, treating the matter with indifference when the doctor spoke openly to her of her condition. It was no doubt a sore trial to be told that she would be unable, henceforward, to go about as she had hitherto done; but she bore it with Spartan fortitude. Her son was with her; it was more to her than she would own; she had him for the present all to herself, and it was very sweet. It could not last long, she knew; but it was a bit of the old times, when her sway was paramount and undisputed; and she was determined to make the most of it while it lasted.

At the end of a fortnight he wrote to Margaret thus:—

“My mother is in too precarious a state for me to think of leaving her. Though Strumpf does not think there is any longer any immediate danger, her condition is very critical. A sudden attack, in her enfeebled state, must prove fatal; and I fear she will never regain the use of her limbs. Under these circumstances, dearest Margaret, I hope to hear that the doctors now think you strong enough to bear the journey,—as you have been out driving, you tell me,—and that you will lose no time, but set off at once, under Carl’s care, who will see to everything on the journey, so that you will have no trouble. I should, of course, return for you myself; but I see that the idea of my leaving her

just now annoys my mother, and might aggravate her malady so seriously, that I have no choice but to give it up. You and baby, with your maids, will have a carriage to yourselves, and sleep at Strasburg; and I can meet you the next day half-way between that and this, returning here the same evening. I will give Carl full instructions."

Margaret did not reply to this letter for two or three days; and then she took no notice of the main point in it. The omission, which was enforced by Mrs. Willington, was, however, fully, perhaps too fully, supplied by that lady herself. She wrote,—

"It is not to be thought of that our dear Margaret should travel for some time to come yet. She requires the tenderest care and nursing, which she cannot have at Schloss Waldstein,—especially now that the Gräfin herself is ill. She pines to be with you, or rather, for you to be with her, since the bare idea of your Schloss just now, in her delicate state is depressing; and it is absolutely essential that, for the present, she should be surrounded by everything that is cheerful. I am sure, therefore, that you will make a point of returning to her here as soon as possible. Baby grows very fast, and every one declares he is the very image of you.

"Always, my dear Rudolph, your affectionate

"CAROLINE WILLINGTON."

When the husband read this cool note he was very angry. Madame Mère happened to be much better that day, and Rudolph was for setting off instantly to Paris and bringing back his wife, in spite of doctors, mother-in-laws, and all. But the Gräfin was too wise

to permit this. She knew what the result would be; the two women would infallibly get round him, and, with the Doctor's aid perhaps, cajole him into remaining at Paris. She knew her son; indeed, if she did not, who should? She dictated a letter for him,—a firm but temperate letter, a very model in its way. It was addressed to his wife, and ignored Mrs. Willington's letter altogether, which exasperated that lady exceedingly.

"So it is to be a *guerre à outrance* between us, is it?" she murmured, as she tossed aside the letter. "So be it, *mon cher*. The letter is your mother's; of course I know that, and she shall find I am not to be treated with impunity. Margaret shall not leave Paris."

A day or two after, Margaret, moved by a sudden impulse, which not even her mother was able to restrain, wrote a long, troubled, affectionate letter to her husband, praying of him to come to her, and promising to return home with him as soon as she was a little stronger. There was a great deal about her baby, a great deal about her own feelings at being away from Rudolph, and of her poor dear mamma's, at the prospect of being parted from her only child. She entreated him not to be angry with her, for she assured him, she was not strong enough to travel yet,—least of all, by herself. Whatever effect this might have produced on Waldstein was neutralised by a second epistle from his mother-in-law. In it, after animadverting sharply upon his contemptuous treatment of her former letter, she went on to say that the term for which Rudolph had taken the apartment having expired, she had renewed it for three months,

as it was out of the question her daughter's returning to Schloss Waldstein until she was stronger. Let Rudolph come and see her, and judge for himself. She was very weak and hysterical, and his protracted absence tried her severely. It was necessary to try and distract her thoughts,—to rouse her, in short. Therefore, Mrs. Willington had begun to be "at home" of an evening to the few friends who had returned to Paris.

Thereupon Rudolph lost all patience, and wrote angrily to his wife, bidding her remember her first duty now was to her husband, and not to her mother. "In the old school, in which I have been bred, wives are still subject to their husbands. Probably in America, under the new system, you have changed all that. I must remind you, however, that you have married a German, not an American. I trust you enjoy your daily drives and evening parties; and it is a pity, as you are strong enough to amuse yourself thus, that you should think you are still too weakly,—your baby being nearly three months old,—to undertake this short journey! My returning for you is impossible. My mother has had another very alarming attack; I cannot leave her." He concluded thus:—"As to Mrs. Willington, I decline to have any further communication with her. I cannot prevent her writing to me, but I shall not answer her letters; and I wish her to understand that it is impossible I should again receive under my roof a person who incites my wife to open disobedience." This was strong language, and it was his own; though, of course, it was Madame Mère who roused him into this attitude of open defiance to Mrs. Willington.

"Be firm, my son. Give way now, and it is all up with thee. Go to Paris, and thou mightest as well sell this, thy old home, at once. Thou wilt be under the thumb of those two for evermore; and she, this misguided Margaret, will never again be thy wife in duty and submission. Be firm now, and she must yield, my son."

Then Rudolph wrote that letter, in which he made the most of, and intrenched himself behind, a slight relapse the Gräfin had had, in his sore dread of being thought to be "under the thumb" of his wife and his wife's mother. Like many a weak man, he resented the shadow while submitting to the substance. He became more and more subject to the will of Madame Mère. An unfortunate rejoinder of Margaret's, in which, stung by what he had written of her mother, she recriminated in no measured terms, setting forth all she had suffered at the Gräfin's hands, was the beginning of a correspondence in which, unhappily, both writers had a prompter at hand, urging them "not to give way," if they wished for ultimate happiness; and very bitter things were said on both sides, which it was hard to forget or to forgive. Yet the young wife loved her husband passionately all this time, and, but for the evil counsellor at her side, would, over and over again, have run and fallen upon his neck and confessed her fault, and humbled herself. So he, too, though the man's character was more obstinate and unforgiving,—the two fatal strong points of weakness,—so he, too, would have been tempted more than once to condone past offences, and fly to his wife's arms, but for the iron grasp which held him back. And thus gradually, by brooding over his wrongs, an implacable feeling

grew up; a settled hostility became the habitual attitude of his mind in thinking of Margaret. He loved her very deeply and faithfully still; no other woman could ever take Margaret's place in his heart; but she had hurt him,—hurt the better as well as the worse parts of his nature, and he felt that she should be made to suffer.

A year, a whole year, passed thus: the erring wife ill at ease in heart and conscience, though now taking part in all the gay society of Paris, with which her mother surrounded her. She found no real pleasure in it; but she met with a great deal of admiration, and it was better than being alone: she was so miserable when forced back upon her own thoughts. If Rudolph suffered no less, at least he had the satisfaction of believing that he was acting on the highest moral principles, and that any other line of conduct would be miserably weak, undignified, and futile. He had now, for some four or five months past, declined to send Margaret any more money for herself or the child, which, during all the earlier period of their separation, he had regularly done; but this attempt to starve the fortress into submission did not seem likely to be successful. From what source Mrs. Willington derived the funds to live as she was doing, Waldstein could not guess, knowing as he did of her money difficulties not long before.

"And so you saw her several times? Tell me all about her, General. How did she look? What did she say about me?"

He had ridden over thirty miles to see General von Hanecke, who was just returned from Paris.

"One thing at a time, lieber Freund. How did

she look? Beautiful. She goes out every night, and is surrounded by Frenchmen. She laughs and looks gay enough, too; but it's all hollow. Depend on it, if it wasn't for that she-wolf, she would be back with you to-morrow."

"Is not that a proof how little she cares for me? To be kept away by a mother!"

The old soldier pursed his lips, and could scarce forbear a smile, though he was really interested in his friend's matrimonial affairs.

"You should have married Clara,—you really should. In the first place, she has no mother . . . However, there is no use in crying over spilt milk. You ask what she said about you? Well, of course, she declared you had behaved cruelly to her; of course she said that you thought more of the gracious lady your mother than you did of her,—that she kept you away. But she asked so many questions—she was so much moved when she spoke of you, that I saw well how the matter stood."

"Kept away by my mother! I like that! Look at this letter—this last letter of hers! Did you ever read such a composition? Do you suppose that after speaking of my mother, of my family, and home, in the way she does——"

"It is the she-wolf's writing, lieber Freund; it is not your Margäret's, depend on it. Separate her from the she-wolf, as I said before, and all will be well between you."

"It is very easy to say that. Doesn't she tell me here, that unless I retract what I said concerning her mother, and consent to welcome her back to my house, she herself will never return? Think of that from a

wife!—instead of her apologising to me for her language! It is monstrous! It wouldn't be believed in a book!"

"No," said the General, drawing a long puff at his pipe, "it wouldn't be believed. Clara wouldn't have written like that; but then women are different,—they are very strange animals, all of them. You have heard of Mrs. Willington's good fortune?" Waldstein shook his head. "An old uncle died in America, some four months ago, leaving her a very large property. There is some little difficulty about it, which may entail her having to go over to America; but, in the meantime, she has taken a larger apartment in Paris on the strength of it, and entertains largely. Yes, women are strange animals!"

Waldstein ground his teeth: the secret of both mother's and daughter's independence, since he had stopped the supplies, was at last explained. He rode home in a worse frame of mind than he had come in. Was ever a husband placed in a more wretched and perplexing position? He loved her; in spite of everything, he loved her still, and she was his by law. Should he try, and have recourse to it, for a restitution of his conjugal rights? What was he to do? How long was this state of things to go on? Wounded love and pride cried aloud,—rage and mortification kept repeating that, in one way or another, there must speedily be an end to this shameful scandal.

And now, as though fuel were wanting to the flame which daily waxed fiercer round Margaret's name, a report reached Madame Mère's ears that a certain Monsieur de Boisjelin was making her daughter-in-law the object of such marked attentions as to attract ob-

servation. The lovely Madame de Waldstein, who was virtually a widow, since her husband had abandoned her,—thus ran a certain version of her story,—did nothing to discourage her French admirer; though it was admitted that she never showed any marked preference for him. But then her love of admiration, her restless search after excitement was such, it was urged, as might lead her to the commission of any folly, even where her heart remained untouched. These words did not fall, I am afraid, upon unwilling ears; though Madame Mère was, of course, piously horrified, shocked, and indignant. Over and above her morality in the abstract, too, there was her morality of pride, as the Gräfin von Waldstein. The possibility of such a stain as this attaching to the name of her son's wife, was very grievous; but she was not unready to give it credence. She had long thought of Margaret as a vain, heartless, unprincipled woman. She could not conceive that a wife, leading the life Margaret was doing away from her husband, and in obstinate defiance of his wishes, could be anything else; and it was thus she spoke of her in conversation with her son. And now this rumour was come to confirm all her suspicions, and she could no longer feel a scruple,—if any restrained her heretofore,—in urging her son to separate himself for ever from his godless wife, unless she was minded instantly to return, an abject and penitent sheep, into the fold of Schloss Waldstein. I believe she regarded Margaret's conduct at this time as a special dispensation of Providence, provided for her son's emancipation.

In the autumn of that year Mrs. Willington found, as von Hanecke had told Rudolph, that her presence

was necessary in America; and she assured her daughter that her only course was to accompany her.

"As to giving in to that obstinate husband of yours now, my darling, it would be folly—worse than folly. When he hears that we have sailed—actually sailed—and are across the Atlantic, he will be in a fine way, depend on it! We shall very soon bring him to his senses. He will follow us to New York at once; mark my words if he doesn't. And, at all events, we shall be back here early in the spring. Your remaining here alone by yourself isn't to be thought of. It would never do. No, you have no choice but to accompany me, or to return to Schloss Waldstein, and lick the dust off that old witch's feet. And a fine time you will have of it, my poor child, for the remainder of your life, treated like a galley-slave, as you will be. I say nothing of myself."

"I think," sobbed Margaret, "I shouldn't mind any—any—anything now so much,—I think I could even stand the old Gräfin, if only Rudolph would apologise about you, mamma."

"That he will never do at Schloss Waldstein; my darling. He may, when we can get him to listen to reason between us; but with his mother at his side, he will never give in about me,—always look at me with a jaundiced eye, depend on it."

The weak, misguided Margaret, with a heavy heart, took her boy up in her arms, and followed her mother across the sea. And when news of this last act of defiance to her husband reached the Schloss, the waves of wrath and indignation, which had been long gathering, reared themselves into one mighty wall, and broke over her fair, foolish head. But before this, a last and

solemn appeal was still made by the irritated husband, who was now almost beside himself; and this letter was put into Margaret's hands soon after her landing at New York. She was miserable; she sobbed for days over it; she wrote a dozen letters, and tore them all up; and then the mother said, "Leave it unanswered. In a month he will be at your feet." But two months, and then three, and then four crept by, without a word, without a sign of life. The most vehement anger, the most stinging reproach would have been preferable to this silence. She grew thin and pale; she fell ill, and her mother became alarmed,—for her daughter's beauty, which she prized so dearly, was impaired. And then, one morning, came a letter, directed to Margaret, in a strong, lawyer-like hand; the reading of which letter to the end she did not accomplish until long afterwards, for, after the first few lines, she fell like a stone upon the floor; and this was followed by a brain fever, in which she hung, during many days, between life and death, and was for weeks incapable of the smallest mental exertion. The letter ran thus:—

"MADAM,—

"I AM instructed by my client, the Count von Waldstein, to inform you that, having abandoned all hope of bringing you to see your duty as a wife, and feeling that the unhappy difference between you will only increase with time, he has felt it to be his duty, as much for your happiness as his own, to release you from a tie which has proved so irksome to you, and to sue for a divorce, which the laws of this country accord without difficulty, as you are doubtless aware, in such cases. Of course it is possible for you to appeal

against this; but the Count has little doubt that your inclinations,—as shown by your conduct,—will not dispose you to do so; and were it otherwise, any professional adviser whom you may consult will instruct you that, after your repeated and resolute refusal to return to the Count's roof, such appeal would be unavailing. The Count desires, further, to inform you that should you consent to your infant son being given up into his care now, he is ready to take him. You are doubtless aware that after his fourth year the child can be legally claimed by his father. Should you put any difficulties in the way of this, by concealing him in America, the Count will relinquish all interest or moral responsibility in his son's future. No attempt will be made to interfere with his legal inheritance to the title and estates; but that portion of his property which is in the Count's own power to dispose of he will devise away from his son, should you offer any obstruction to the child's being given up to his father on the completion of his fourth year."

When Margaret was able, after many months, to be brought to Europe, a friend met her at Liverpool. He came to break the fact to her that, according to German law, she was no longer the wife of the Count von Waldstein. She was once more Margaret Willington.

CHAPTER V.

ON a golden summer's evening, some years after the events just recorded, one of those rattling glass vehicles, with a hump of luggage on their backs, which are common throughout Germany, drove up the steep street of Waldstadt, and stopped at the only Gasthaus of the town. The carriage was thickly powdered over with fine white dust from the roads, which had not seen a shower now for some weeks. Its occupants,—a lady in mourning, with a handsome boy of eight or nine, and a maid,—had evidently suffered a good deal from the heat. The lady, indeed, seemed in delicate health. She kept her veil down, so that it was not possible to see her face; but her step, as she got out, was feeble, and she held fast by the child's hand, as though she found some support there, and dreaded to lose it. The boy stretched his little legs when he found himself on terra-firma, and showed by his wonderful contortions that his small limbs had been cramped for some hours in that hot, dusty carriage.

The best rooms of the "Schwartz Adler" were unlocked, the hermetically-closed shutters and windows opened, and a close smell of feather-beds and deal furniture was permitted to escape.

The child had his supper, the maid had hers; the lady sent down, untasted, the food that was brought her. She sat away from the light, her head resting between her two hands, each time the "Kellner" entered the room. And the boy ran about, clambered up the wardrobe, got a-straddle the great black stove,

and indulged in a variety of pastimes, testing generally to the soundness of his lungs and limbs.

"Look, mamma! here I am in the castle. I've taken it from the great big giant who lives here, and I've cut off his head. Why don't you look, mamma? Down there, on the chest of drawers, is where the princess lives. I'm going to carry her off. Do look, mamma!"

The pale lady raised her head from time to time and smiled; and once, when she so looked up, the tears were in her eyes; but the child did not see them. At last, the young gentleman declared he was sleepy; the maid came, and he went to bed. He slept in his mother's room; and here, presently, when the sky was quite dark, and the stars grew thick above the red gables on the opposite side of the narrow village street, shedding their tender light through the lattice of the little room, she came softly and knelt with the child beside his bed, and listened while he prayed that God would bless dear papa. And when the golden head was laid upon its pillow, and the heavy lids closed over the blue, dreamful eyes, the mother stayed there yet awhile upon her knees, and prayed her own prayer to her heavenly Father. Not for herself; the time was past now when she could ask for anything in this world but strength to bear the cross laid upon her. And now, poor soul! that she was about voluntarily to add fourfold to that heavy burthen, her thought, her prayer, was not for herself,—not that the cup might be taken from her, but that, by drinking it to the very bitter lees, she might further her child's welfare in this world and in the next.

After this she rose, and drawing the veil about her

face, crept downstairs, and through the archway out into the quiet, star-lit street. One or two women with their children at open doors, one or two husbandmen returning from their labour afar off in the hills, turned round to look at the tall, slight figure in black as it glided by. Then she came upon the white hill-side road, with the dusty vines to right and left, and she was alone. A single light twinkled from one of the windows of the Schloss; the outlines of its towers showed dim against the clear, dark summer night. A little more than half-way up the hill the wanderer turned her feeble steps in among the vines to the left, where, some three hundred yards distant, the garden-wall came down in terraces, and was washed, so to speak, by the great sea of green at its feet. As she tottered on, faint and thirsting, between the grapes, some half ripened, some already purple, she plucked a bunch, and put it to her lips. "It would not have been theft once," she murmured.

As she drew near to the foot of the garden-wall the sound of voices fell upon her ear. She had thought that at this hour, under cover of the darkness, she was safe; and might yield to the weakness, the longing which was at her heart, once more to behold that old terrace-walk, associated as it was with the few happy hours in her short life. She shrank back; then suddenly, as the voice of one of the speakers fell upon her ear, she pressed her two hands against her heart, and half crouched, half sank upon the ground. She could not have gone a step farther had her life depended on it. She did not faint, but her heart seemed to stop beating, and she could neither see nor hear for some minutes. At last, she was conscious of another

voice,—a voice she did not know: she could divine but too well, however, to whom it belonged, and she shivered. With the blue vault of heaven and its myriad stars above her head, the poor stricken creature lay, and saw the dim outline of two figures against the sky, and heard the sound of their slow-pacing feet upon the gravel. There, upon that very walk, where tenderest words had once been breathed into her ear, she heard the same lips breathe like language to another. She had exiled herself from Paradise, and she was standing now before the gate which was for ever closed on her in this world.

Said the man's voice,—

"Who can believe that it is five years? Would that my mother had lived to see how happy the marriage she planned has been for me, Clara!"

"She was very good to me," replied a pleasant voice. "All the same, my dear Rudolph, I am not sure that we should have been as happy had the good mother been living with us."

"Ah!" sighed the husband, who was pursuing his own train of ideas, "had I followed her advice I should have been spared the three most painful years of my life, and six happy ones would have been added to it."

"You know you would not look at me for ever so long," laughed the lady, good-humouredly. Then, changing her tone, she added,—"Ah! though I owe your mother a great debt of gratitude, yet, nevertheless, my dear, I always feel for your poor Margaret. I often think whether even I, with my German training, and rigid, old-world ideas, could have stood the excellent mother's iron dominion here. I never was tried, you

know, as she died so soon after our marriage; but when I remember that your Margaret had, besides, a foolish mother——”

“By-the-bye, your uncle mentions her death in his letter to-day. She died at Paris, it seems, some weeks ago. I have never been able until now, Clara, to hear her name without impatience; but she is gone, and so let her memory rest. I forgive her all the wrong she did me. I think she must have repented of it herself before she died.”

They walked to the further end of the terrace in silence. As they came back the wife stopped, and exclaimed,—

“See the moon just appearing over the edge of the hill yonder, Rudolph! What a night it is! Are we not better here than in Stutgardt, where the good Queen would have us? For my part, I regret nothing at Court. You say you think it right that I should go there occasionally; but I should be quite content myself never to leave our old home.”

“Ah, it is well for us to go away sometimes, my wife, if it be only to enjoy the pleasure of our return,—of our solitude. In great crowds two hearts can never hear each other beat in perfect unison, I think.”

Did he recall the morning, nearly ten years ago, when he uttered these same words, standing on that very spot? No; but one who heard him remembered them only too well. In spite of herself, a moan, like the faint cry of a wounded bird, broke from her lips as she lay there.

“What was that? Did you hear nothing down there among the vines? It sounded to me like the feeble wail of an infant.”

"Would that it were an omen, my Clara," said the husband, gently. "But Heaven, no doubt, sees fit to deny us that blessing, lest we should be too happy."

The trembling woman, whose head was bowed upon her breast, heard the kiss which followed, and lifted up her eyes. The moon, which had now fully risen from behind the shoulder of the hill, shone bright upon Clara's face. It was a broad, sweet, kindly face; but, there was no beauty that a man should desire. The goodness of soul that shone out through that plain mask was its sole attraction. And,—alas! for poor human nature!—even in that hour, when all was at an end for her, when she knew that all earthly things were fading fast away, a gleam of consolation shot across the desolate woman's heart: "At least, I had something once which she has not." But the next moment the miserable triumph gave place to a purer and nobler satisfaction. "She is a good woman. I read it in her face,—her words confirm it. O God! I thank thee for that."

The husband and wife turned slowly towards the house; and for an hour or more the unhappy creature lay there in the vineyard, utterly prostrate and motionless, save for the low sob which ever and anon broke from her: "O Lord! give me strength,—give me strength! Make me ready for the sacrifice,—even of my son, O Lord!" And He who spared Abraham's sacrifice spared hers.

It was very late when she reached the inn,—she could hardly drag her feeble steps so far. The maid was alarmed when she saw her face, which was like that of the dead; and ran down-stairs, shrieking, for a doctor. The long-ago-despised Strumpf came; so doth

fate sometimes avenge us. He sat up with her the remainder of that night, which he hardly thought she could live through. It seemed as though the springs of life had suddenly snapped,—whatever may have been the learned name the doctor gave the disease. She was utterly exhausted, yet her stomach refused food; even the stimulants given to her she could scarcely swallow.

Late the next day, as Rudolph returned from a long drive with his wife, a letter was put into his hand. The messenger had been waiting some time, and said the matter was urgent. It came from the sick lady at the inn. The Count started as he looked at the superscription, and changed colour. Then he broke the seal with no steady hand, and turned into his own room to read the letter. It contained these few words,—

“A contrite woman supplicates you to come and speak to her before she dies. She did not come here for this, Rudolph,—to trouble you in her last hour; but to accomplish a purpose which she prays earnestly she may see effected before she leaves the world. And the doctor says she has not many hours to live.”

Half an hour later Waldstein stood by the bedside of her whom he had once loved so well. He was shocked and deeply affected at the sight. In the wreck before him the beautiful Margaret was scarcely recognisable. Strange to say, she whose agony had been so poignant a few hours previous was now far calmer than he was. In this one might see that the hand of peace-restoring Death was upon her. The boy, in a passion of tears, was flung at the foot of the bed; the maid, too, was weeping bitterly. The good

doctor stood there, and, as Count von Waldstein entered, poured something down the throat of the fast-sinking lady, to enable her to go through the interview upon which all her thoughts were fixed. Then he and the maid withdrew.

She held out her hand.

"I am glad you are come. It makes my going so much easier,—so much happier; though I have written it all,—all I had to say,—here." She laid her hand upon a thick letter by her side. "And I never doubted but that you would fulfil that wish, at least. Darling boy, look up. Here is that papa, for whom you have prayed night and morning, come at last!"

"If he is come to take you," said the boy, looking up through his tears into the stranger's face, "I don't want him. He shan't take you away, mamma."

She closed her eyes for a moment: there was a sting in the words the child little guessed.

"It is not papa,—it is God who is taking me away, my boy. Rudolph, this is your first-born,—your only one. Take him, and be a father to him."

"I will," murmured Waldstein, with averted face.

"Do not visit my sins upon the child," she continued. "There is nothing about him that need ever remind you of me; it has made him doubly dear to me that he was so like you. And since it has not pleased God to bless your wife with a child, she will be as a mother to this one,—I know she will. I was in the vineyard last night, and heard her words. She has a good and tender heart; and if I hesitated before to entrust my child to her keeping, I need do so no longer."

"She has always spoken compassionately of you, Margaret, and as I promise you solemnly for myself, so I can undertake for her, that the child shall be henceforward as our own."

She stopped for breath, and then gasped out,—

"I came here, meaning to ask you to take my darling; and then to go away, in my solitude, heart-broken. He was the only thing I had on earth, and I resolved, for his sake, to make the sacrifice. Why should I any longer stand between him and you,—between him and his future? But God was merciful, Rudolph,—it has pleased Him to spare me this. I am happy to go,—very happy. My life, though short, has been sad enough. I have nothing to regret in leaving it, since I was to be parted from my darling. And now,—while I can still see you, still hear your voice,—will you say that you forgive me, Rudolph?"

He was on his knees beside her. She felt the hot tears on her hand as he pressed it to his lips.

"My poor Margaret, we have both much need of forgiveness. I was much to blame,—perhaps more than you. I know it now. I will not speak of others. We will not try to cast the burden of our faults upon other shoulders in this solemn moment. Rather, let us ask God to forgive us our sins to Him, as we forgive our sins to one another."

Then his strong, tremulous voice rose in humble prayer to the Father of Mercies, echoed by the faint whispers of the dying woman.

Before night there fell a great peace and stillness upon that little room; and the child was sleeping, wearied out with sobs, in the Countess's dressing-room in Schloss Waldstein.

Reader, I myself have seen some of the persons about whom I have here written. Years have passed since I stood upon that terrace, and, looking down into the vineyard below, thought upon these things: how folly and weakness work more evils in the world than wickedness itself; and how quickly a great happiness, which would have weathered the rudest storms of fate, may founder upon shores where no rock is to be seen.

THE TRAGEDY AT MERE HALL.

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to

THE TRAGEDY AT MERE HALL.

IT was a golden afternoon in August, and we were a party of eight on the Mere, of whom I was the eldest, the others being mostly giddy boys and girls. They will none of them ever forget that afternoon, I think, though each of them should live to see three-score years and ten.

When on the Monday we met at Mere Hall, which our friend, Lady Ashleigh, had just taken on a lease, we were all strangers to each other. St. Leger De Maine and I laughed together, this same Thursday afternoon, when we remembered how we had come down from town, three days before, in the same carriage, had read our respective papers, and had never uttered a word, like true Englishmen, during four mortal hours. For here were we, on the Thursday, already intimate friends. Miss Vivien Galway was also in the train, and I, who knew her by sight at London balls, felt rather alarmed when I found her alighting at the Mere Hall station. So fashionable a young lady would, I thought, spoil all our simple pleasures in the country; she turned out to be the life and soul of the fun—until that fun came to a sudden and untimely end.

Our charming hostess had only been at Mere Hall a few days when we arrived; it was all new to her, the

people on the estate and in the neighbourhood unknown, the very park itself unexplored. It was a sweet old place, much neglected by reason of the impoverished fortunes of its owner, overgrown with mosses, and its garden choked with weeds, but affording ample accommodation for twice our party, in its endless bedrooms, furnished in faded chintz, and peopled with many generations on its walls. On the strength of certain festivities in the neighbourhood, Lady Ashleigh had bidden us down here, though she was, of course, anything but settled in her new home; but Rosalind, her lovely little daughter, was of an age and of a temperament to enjoy everything, and for her sake this impromptu party was got up. Rosalind it was who, this afternoon, after luncheon, proposed that we should go down to the Mere, which lay at the further end of the park, and navigate its unknown waters in a certain punt we had remarked among the reeds as we rode by the previous day. There were, besides those I have already named, young Apsley and his sister; Georgey Fynchden, of the Fusiliers, a good-looking, impudent, engaging youngster; and Sir Reynald Vavasour, the oldest and soberest of the party, next to myself. All the heads of families had been expressly invited to stay away; it was a party of boys and girls brimming over with good spirits, among whom I felt that I must seem a very slow coach, for I could neither swallow sixpences and bring them out of my boots, as St. Leger De Maine did, nor walk round my own head twenty times without falling flat on the ground, like Georgey Fynchden, nor catch goose-berries in my mouth when they were thrown at me ten yards off, like that expert young Apsley. I could only sketch; and unless I caricatured them all,

this mild accomplishment was incapable of bringing any grist of fun to the common mill. Yet they were very long-suffering with me, I am bound to say; and sweet Rosalind, especially, with her pretty little ways, tried to make me feel that I was not a cumbersome appendage to this joyous band. We walked across the park, through green herbage, topped with tall feathery grasses, which became a sheet of tremulous silver, as the sun shimmered along their edges. Then, through a wood of firs, whose branches interlaced against the sky, where white-tailed squirrels were leaping from bough to bough, and the ground was carpeted with the resinous fibre of the trees overhead. At length we came to the edge of the Mere, and here we looked to find the boat, but it was nowhere to be seen. A wild duck or two fluttered up from the bulrushes at our approach, and skimmed along the glassy water, leaving a pearly ripple in their track; there was nothing else in sight. But the Mere was a mile and a half round, with many a creek and hooded cove, where the boat might have drifted, and now lie unseen. We resolved to walk round, and, if possible, find it. There was a roughish path along the water's edge, now over big pebbles, now through high weeds and brambles, with the wide-armed elms leaning over, here and there, till they touched the water; the steep bank of wood running up almost perpendicularly from it in places. Georgey Fynchden, who was in front, had just propounded some riddle, apropos of the bulrushes, about Moses, (the most prolific character for such *jeux d'esprit* in Sacred Writ) when Vivien Galway, who was next him, suddenly stopped, and exclaimed, in a stage whisper, "Good gracious! Look there—under that tree—is it

the melancholy Jacques? Come, Rosalind, *you* ought to know; are we going to Act *As you like it*? If it isn't Jacques, who is it, sitting by the water's edge, in that attitude? Look, he doesn't even raise his head when he hears us."

We were, in truth, close beneath the fallen trunk on which the man in question was sitting, high up, upon the bank, but just where an opening in the trees gave an uninterrupted view over the greater part of the lake. He had nothing on his head, and his hair, which was of a light-brown colour and abundant, was in the wildest disorder; but we could not see his face, which he kept buried in his hands. He was dressed in a shooting-jacket, and part of a fishing-rod lay beside him on the bank.

"What business has he here?" said Fynchden. "Who is he? I vote we ask him."

But Miss Ashleigh suggested that it was, in all probability, some neighbour, or tenant of her mother's, who had always been accustomed to wander about the place at will, and with whose prescriptive rights Lady Ashleigh would be sorry to interfere without first making inquiries.

"He is a very queer-looking fellow," said De Maine, as we walked on. "I don't half like his look."

A few yards further, we came upon the object of our quest, wedged in among the rushes. An old flat-bottomed boat, which had apparently drifted here—for it was not moored where the weeds had caught it. Was it safe? Was it large enough to hold us all? I declared *not*, but Sir Reynald, the next senior in command, stoutly asserted that it was; and the juniors of course all sided with him. As it was wet and dirty

inside, we all gathered armfuls of grass and leaves, and strewed them in the stern of the boat for the ladies to sit on. Then the three skipped in, and squeezed themselves and their gay striped petticoats into the narrowest possible space; and the four young fellows jumped in after them, Fynchden seizing the long punting pole, and Apsley the one dilapidated oar. From no selfish pusillanimity was it that I hesitated to follow; but really the crazy old tub looked already dangerously full: another human being would, I thought, make "the cup o'erflow." I therefore resisted Miss Ashleigh's kind supplications that I would not desert them, and seating myself on the water's edge, I drew out my sketch-book. "No; I must draw you all. You make such a pretty picture, with all those bright colours; quite a bouquet of flowers floating on the water."

"It is distance lends enchantment, I'm afraid," laughed Rosalind. "You never said anything half so civil until some yards of water divided us."

Then they floated away, and the voices and the laughter grew more and more indistinct. As to drawing them, it was impossible; the punt, propelled by Fynchden's long arms, performed such wonderful evolutions, that I never got it for two seconds together from the same point of view. I had just shut my book in disgust, when I heard a step behind me. The boat was, by this time, nearing a long narrow promontory of rough stones, on the opposite side of the lake. I turned, and found the stranger we had passed a quarter of an hour before, standing close to me. His face, which I now saw for the first time, was deadly pale, and the effect of ghastliness was increased by a

recent cut upon the cheek, where the blood was scarcely yet dry. The sweat stood out in great drops upon his forehead, and I observed that his hand trembled nervously, as he spoke.

"Call to them to come back, sir. Tell them not to—not to go out there, will you?"

"Why? Isn't the boat safe?" I exclaimed, starting up. "Does it leak?"

"No—yes—yes, it isn't safe. For God's sake call to them to come back, from that—from that point. Shout to them, sir, won't you?"

And I shouted; for the man's agitation was so great that it conveyed to me some vague sense of imminent danger, though the obvious question rose to my lips immediately I saw the boat's head, in answer to my signals, swing round.

"But if the boat isn't seaworthy, they had better land on that side, instead of recrossing the lake?"

"Anywhere but there—let them land anywhere but there! Let them recross the lake; let them land anywhere but there!"

"Have you been in the boat yourself, to-day?"

He gave me a terrified stare, like a wild beast brought to bay. "No, I have *not* been in it. No one can say I was in it. I defy them to prove it. I mean," here he pressed his hand to his head, and moaned, "if there is any—any anything amiss with the boat, I didn't do it."

I now made up my mind that the man was mad, and this conclusion, though not altogether a pleasant one, as we stood together on the water's edge, (and the man was a head and shoulders taller than I) re-

lieved my anxiety somewhat as to my friends' peril; they being still some distance from the shore. But any personal apprehension, if I entertained it, was quickly dispelled; for the stranger, almost instantly after this, turned upon his heel, sprang up the bank, and was quickly lost among the trees. I could now hear Fynchden's voice, shouting, "What's the row? Do you want to get in?"

"Boat isn't safe," I bellowed. "Man says, shore there dangerous. Come back here."

"Tell him he's an idiot," was the reply.

"The punt hasn't let in a drop of water," cried De Maine.

Then rose the chorus of girls, "We won't come back, unless you promise to get in."

It was the only way to secure their return, so I promised; and three or four minutes later, the old punt, with its cargo, of blithe, boisterous, young spirits, ran up on the beach close to where I stood. I told my story very impressively, as I thought.

"Depend on it," said Fynchden, "the lout was drunk. Did you ask him what business he had in the boat at all?"

They pulled up some boards from the boat's bottom, to verify their assertion that it had not made a drop of water, when Apsley called out, "Hallo! look what I've found. A pocket-book! It must be that mad duffer's." He was not scrupulous as to examining it; but there was no name on the first page to indicate its owner. A number of entries—chiefly farm accounts, apparently—were scrawled here and there throughout the book, and the words, "*Reuben owes me*," occurred

constantly; only the sum steadily increased until, in the last entry, it reached upwards of seventy pounds.

"There is method in his madness, at least," laughed De Maine.

They insisted on getting me into the boat, and disposed of me somewhere between Sir Reynald Vavasour's legs, where I sat, crunched up, with my knees in my mouth, and my head hanging over the boat's side, stirring, with the bulrush that I held, the marvels of the little deep, as we lazily clove the water; dragon-flies, and wondrous many-winged insects, forests of tiny pink-eyed weeds, and groves of red-brown water-mosses. Anon, we came to shallower water, and I could see the fine sandy bed of the Mere, starred with green, and violet, and golden pebbles, fitted together, here and there, by the cunning hand of nature, into shapes of tessellated pavement. Tadpoles and minnows darted across from under the awful shadow of the punt as we advanced, but the bigger fish all kept to the deeper and weed-thickened portions of the Mere.

We were now at the lower end of it, and began working our way round by the opposite shore, floating dreamily on, like the Lotos-Eaters, under the cool, green, light of the overhanging, large-leaved boughs. Some one struck up the Canadian Boat Song, and we all joined in chorus, when I broke in upon the harmony by calling out,

"Hallo, Fynchden! look where we are. Turn the boat's head round; we're not fifty yards from the very point that fellow warned me against; we may just as well avoid it, you know."

"Stuff! what danger can there be? I vote, on the contrary, we make straight for it;" and disregarding

my sapient voice, on we went. The water, though still translucent, was much deeper, as we neared the stony tongue of land which advanced into the lake some thirty yards beyond the bank on either side. I called out lustily to Fynchden not to propel us any more with his long pole, lest haply he should drive in the boat's bottom upon some sharp point of rock. We were now not more than five or six yards from the promontory.

Suddenly, there was a piercing cry. It came from Miss Galway, who had been hanging on the boat's side, and now threw herself back, covering her face with her hands. I stooped forward and looked down into the water. Good God! What was it?—Could it be . . . ? . . . *a face*, livid, distorted, staring up, with horrible wide-open eyes at me, through the clear water from the stony bottom of the lake.

Most of the men, and two of the ladies, had had the same horrible vision. There could be no doubt, no question about it. "Come away! For heaven's sake, let us come away!" shrieked Miss Galway: and I saw that, in truth, the first thing to be done was to land the ladies as speedily as possible. They were all pale and trembling: I thought Miss Galway would have fainted, as I handed her out of the boat; and the scene of terror and dismay natural on such an occasion I need not here detail. "You had better go home at once," I said. "We must—some of us—remain here, and see after this." They turned away in among the trees, clinging to each other like a herd of frightened deer, while we pushed the boat off once again to the spot where we had seen that ghastly sight. There it was: we felt it with the oar: and, though there could

not be a doubt that the man was dead, the most urgent matter was to get the body at once out of the water. Fynchden and Apsley threw off their coats and jumped in: we in the boat held the pole and the oar, to which they clung with one hand, while with the other they lifted the body. It was not without some difficulty they succeeded in this, for the body was very heavy: a fact accounted for when we found that the pockets were *filled with large stones*. Life had been extinct some time: he was quite cold. The hands were rigid in the convulsion of their death agony: the face was awful to behold. Whether or not it had been evil in life, the horror of a sudden and violent death had scared it with an expression which none of us who looked upon it then, I think, will ever forget. He was a short, powerful man: from his dress apparently a well-to-do farmer. Who was he? What was his history? How did he come by his end? We had all one impression. The look stamped on the features did not belong to suicide. Yet the pockets filled with stones showed that this was no accidental death. There had been foul play. Our thoughts flew simultaneously to the man who had warned us from approaching this very spot—the man whose wild demeanour had led me to believe him to be a maniac. We held a brief consultation: then Apsley was despatched to the keeper's lodge, half-a-mile distant, and Sir Reynald volunteered to return to the Hall, and send off a messenger to the nearest police-station, while the rest of us kept guard over the body. We laid it on the bank, spread a handkerchief over the face, and sat down together in silence.

The August sunset was dropping its great golden

flakes upon the Mere: the purple twilight was stealing up from the sombre masses of the park-woods: it was an impressive scene, in the unbroken calm of the summer's evening, contrasting forcibly with our thoughts and feelings as we sat there, beside a murdered man, whose life was unknown to us, whose death was a mystery. My speculations thereon were interrupted by Fynchden's touching me on the arm. He pointed, without speaking, to the opposite side of the Mere. Under the shadow of the trees I could just dimly perceive a figure running stealthily along: it was too far to identify it with certainty, but I had little doubt that it was that of the man on whom the thoughts of us all were turned at that moment. He disappeared among the trees, and we saw him no more. A quarter of an hour later we were joined by the keeper and several of the labourers on the estate. They at once recognised the dead man as Richard Boyce, the tenant of the Mere Hall farm. He was the elder of two brothers, whose father had rented the farm for many years, and had left the remainder of the lease to this Richard, subject to certain charges in favour of the younger son, Reuben. The latter, who lived with his brother, and nominally helped him, was but a poor creature in his way, who exasperated his brother by his idleness, and did nothing towards their common welfare. Fishing was almost his only occupation, and though better educated than Richard, an indomitable indolence prevented his turning his acquirements to any account. He was generally good-tempered, and bore his brother's brutal jokes and attacks with wonderful patience; but he had been known occasionally to break out, and his violence then was stated to have

been very great. He was said to be indebted to his brother in a considerable sum, and Richard had more than once threatened to eject him from the farm. On the other hand, Reuben had denied the justice of this claim, and had declared that it was not in his brother's power, under the stipulations of his father's will, to turn him out of the farm, as long as he chose to remain there. He further alleged that, shortly after his father's death, he had handed over a large sum of money to his brother, for improvements on the farm: and he, in consequence, held himself to be entitled to some share of the profits from the same, not a penny of which had he ever received. It seemed doubtful whether he could bring forward any proofs of this, for he was no man of business: some believed it, some did not: one thing was clear—there was bad blood between the brothers. I need not say that in the description of the dead man's brother we at once detected the man we had seen—the man on whom all our suspicions now firmly rested. Everything tended to strengthen these. There was now evidence of a probable motive for the commission of the crime. I got the men to carry the body to the farm, where it was arranged that some of us should await the arrival of the police, while the others returned to inform Lady Ashleigh of what had passed. Fortunately there was no wife, no child, nor near relation to whom the intelligence had to be broken: a couple of old servants who had known the dead man from boyhood, were the only occupants of the farm. Reuben was absent, they said; had been so since dinner at one o'clock, when there had been high words between the brothers. Something of the quarrel had been overheard. There

had been accusation and recrimination: bitter and insulting taunts from Richard had been replied to with more warmth than usual by Reuben. He had been called a beggar, a dependent on his brother's charity: he demanded now to be repaid the money he had given to Richard; then he would go. The quarrel waxed yet more violent, but the servants could not give a very clear account of what passed after this: as indeed, in a loud and angry altercation, it is difficult to do. Richard suddenly rose, and went out in the direction of the lake: his brother shortly followed him with his rod: he had not been seen since. A magistrate, resident in the neighbourhood, who was riding by, and heard what had occurred, now appeared, and on the arrival of the head of the police, the coroner was at once communicated with, while a summons was issued for the apprehension of Reuben Boyce, on suspicion of being concerned in the death of his brother.

During all this night, and the next morning, the search for him proved fruitless. In the mean time, the coroner's inquest sat on the body, and returned an open verdict of Found Drowned. And yet, I believe, the fact of Reuben's having absconded left no reasonable doubt on any one's mind of his guilt. In the afternoon, I learnt that he had, at last, been caught hiding in a wood some miles distant. He was faint from want of food, and from evident distress of mind; but he offered no resistance, manifested no surprise, proffered no explanation. He appeared, indeed, to be mentally, as well as physically, thoroughly worn out; the state of cerebral excitement under which he had shown himself to me, having been succeeded by a prostration so complete as to deaden the memory, if

not the conscience. I was, of course, present when he was examined, and gave my deposition as to what had passed between the prisoner and myself on the edge of the Mere. He seemed scarcely to hear what I said; shook his head when asked whether he had any questions to put to me; and, when urged by the magistrate, in the kindest manner, to state if he was innocent, and support that statement by any evidence he could adduce, he only sighed deeply, and murmured that he believed his mind was gone from him: he could remember nothing. It seemed to him that his brain had been on fire: he supposed that he must have been mad.

"That's it," whispered De Maine to me. "He is not such a fool as he looks. You'll see, the man who defends him at the assizes, will pull him through on the score of insanity."

Before committing the prisoner to gaol, the magistrate asked whether any further evidence was forthcoming—the deposition of the two servants having been taken. A policeman here said that there was a labouring man outside, with two boys, his sons, who said that they knew somewhat of the matter; and two intelligent looking lads, of thirteen and eleven, were brought in.

I transcribe what followed as correctly as I can. I noted down the lads' evidence in their own quaint Dorset, at the time, though I will not vouch for it that I made no mistake.

"We a-zeed Maister Boyce, Bill an' me did, when we were i' the wood. We a-zeed en come down to th' pon', an' tiake th' punt, what Maister Reuben fishes in mos' days. Zoo when Maister Reuben come, it

wer' a-gone, an' we hearn en swear a bit, an' he begun to fish from th' bank, till Maister Boyce 'e come wi' th' punt, an' begun a-callin' en niames, an' villed his pawkets wi' big stuones, an' begun a-peltin' Maister Reuben. Aone het en on's fiace, an' miade en bleed; an', hot-like, he picked en up an' a-drowed en back; but Maister Boyce 'e a-ducked his head, an' zomehow 'e a-vell roight for'ard i' th' water, an' 'cause o' th' stuones in's pawket, I z'pause, 'e never riz no muore. Maister Reuben giv' a girt cry, an' zeemed ztruck all o' a heap. 'E coodden reach en, 'cause in thik pliace th' pon's sa deep, tho' awnly a few yards fro' the bank. We wer' that a-feared, we dussn't stir; an' Maister Reuben, 'e run away like's if 'e wer' foolish, after a while, wi' his hand to's head."

"And why did you give no alarm? Why did you keep all this to yourself until now, pray?"

The magistrate asked this question somewhat severely, and the elder boy—the spokesman—hung his head. The younger one, with a burning cheek, at last took courage and murmured what was unintelligible to me, until it was translated:

"Coz we was anutten what we didn't ought."

The magistrate himself looked puzzled for a moment, until the sergeant of police, with promptitude, explained that the witnesses had been stealing nuts in the Mere Hall woods, and had, therefore, been afraid, at first, to come forward and state what they had seen; until, their young consciences smiting them, when they learnt how Reuben was suspected of murder, they revealed all to their father.

As to the accused, he had been listening to this evidence, meantime, with an expression of face which

I shall never forget. With the first words the boy uttered, it seemed as though the cloud began slowly to drift away from his troubled brain. The cheek kindled into a little spot of colour, the deadened light of the eye revived, the breath came short and quick. As the boy spoke, the whole of that scene—the facts of which, I am confident, had completely faded from the memory of the unhappy man, while nothing but the horrible impression of them remained—the whole of that tragic scene returned to him with vivid distinctness; and he burst into tears. He seemed to wish to speak, but it was some minutes before he was sufficiently recovered to do so. At last he said, in a broken voice:

“What you have heard, sir, is the truth. I know it all now: my brain has been troubled. This is how it happened. We had words about money, and other things, *he* and I. He was—well! no matter, sir, I can’t say anything against him now; but he swore I had no right to fish in the Mere, and shouldn’t use the boat again. When I came down and found it gone, and him in it, I was angry, because I knew I had as good a right to it as him, and that he had taken it to rile me; but I began quietly to fish from the bank, until I saw him at the Point filling his pockets with stones. I guessed what he was after. In a minute or two he shoved in a bit nearer to me (out away in the deep water, however), and began blackguarding me, and pelting me with the stones from his pocket. I kept my patience as long as I could, at last one cut my cheek open; and I picked it up and shied it back. He ducked his head; the stone fell into the boat close to him; and he—— there was a plunge, and a yell, and he was gone, sir! My God! I shall never forget it. I couldn’t

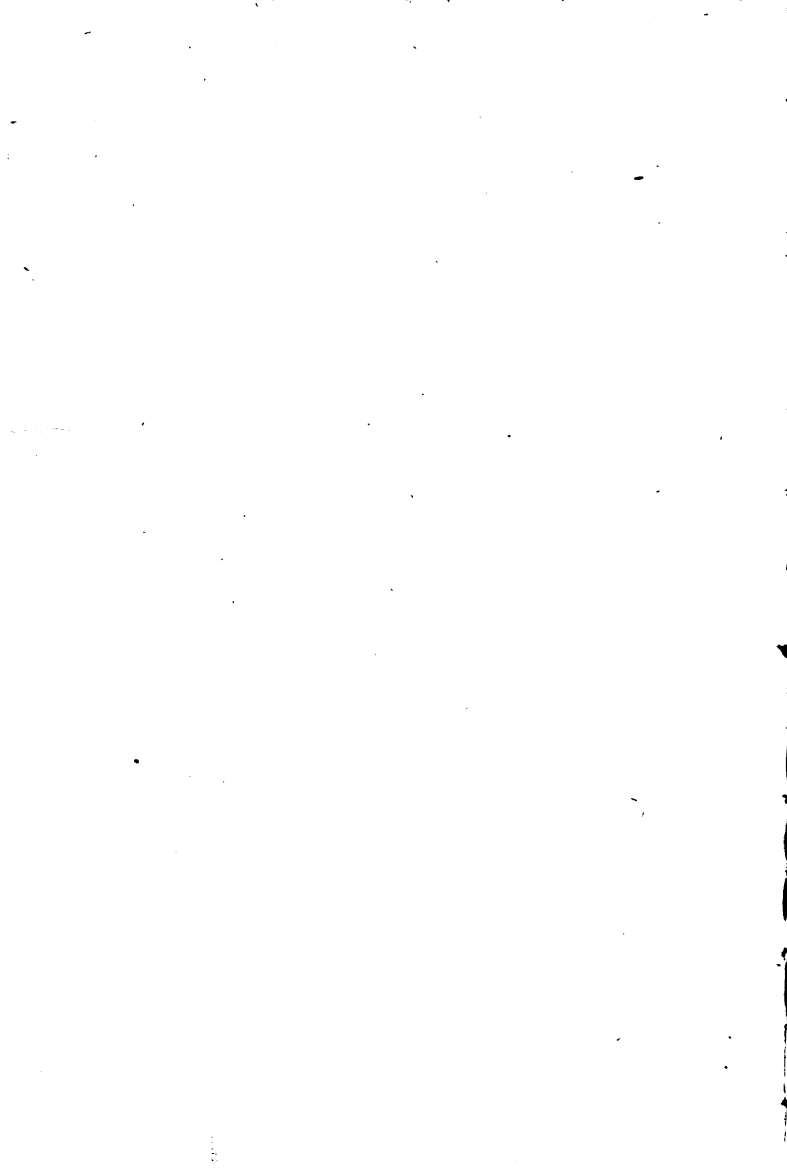
have saved him if I'd tried, for I can't swim; but I don't think—may God forgive me!—that, for the *first* moment I wished it; the next, I would have given anything—anything to have brought him back to life. I had killed him—it seemed to me so—and Cain's brand was upon me. My brain whirled round—it seemed on fire. I thought I was going mad. I didn't know what I was about, but I ran round the lake, as far away from the spot as possible. My hope, I think, was that the body would never be discovered; for no one ever used the boat but myself—ever went on the lake. I nearly died of horror, therefore, when I saw these gentlemen get into the boat—which had drifted to the opposite bank—and row towards the very spot. *I knew how clear the water was.* I tried, like a miserable fool, to prevent their going there. I scarcely know what I said to this gentleman; it was all of no use. I remember watching the boat after this, and seeing them bring up the body; and I remember nothing more. I believe I ran away into the thickest part of a distant wood, where they found me."

In the manner, not less than the words of the speaker, it was easy to trace the weak, impressionable character of the young farmer, who had received a somewhat unusual amount of education for one of his class, but whose mental fibre, never of the strongest, had given way before the sudden pressure of this catastrophe.

It was scarcely possible for circumstantial evidence to be stronger than it had been in this case; and how easily may one be misled by even far weaker! Here was the moral that we all drew from the unlooked-for result of that morning's investigation. This man—

round whom a net-work of circumstances was so strongly woven—whose story was so improbable, that, even had his memory been untroubled, the truth, told by him, would never have been believed; this man, whose demeanour, not less than the weight of evidence, seemed so conclusive against him, would assuredly have been tried at the next assizes, and found guilty of Manslaughter, but for the testimony of those two small eye-witnesses to the truth. Alas! how many an innocent man's life may have been sacrificed for want of such!

VALERIAN'S HONEYMOON.



VALERIAN'S HONEYMOON.

A FRAGMENT.

My darling stepped out from the little inn-window on to the wooden balcony, draped with vine-leaves and heavy bunches of half-ripened purple grapes, which overhung the door of the *osteria*. It was a lapis-lazuli night, such as is only known in Italy. Below us lay a great water, calm as that bay of contentment where-into our lives had now glided. Stars trembled there, and the moon swung her full-fed lamp on the very edge of the ripple that washed the shore. There came a heavy odour of orange-blossoms from the gardens about us, blent with the less rare odour of tobacco, from the pipes of ostlers and wayfarers seated around the door below. The murmur of their voices was all that broke the silence.

Between the *osteria* and the lake ran the dusty high-road, where the diligence half an hour ago had passed, and stopped here to change horses. But there was not much traffic, saving a cart or two, oxen-drawn and laden with maize, and a curious old vehicle, half-gig, half-chaise, bearing a notary from the neighbouring town to the bedside of some village Dives, cumbered in his last hours with the disposition of his wealth (so the waiter informed me). Saving for these the dust had slept undisturbed, in layers several inches thick,

upon the road, during all the hours we had been here. And now the night had come, and even such infrequent traffic would cease.

But, contrary to our expectation, as we two stood there hand-in-hand upon the balcony, listening to a cicala in the dusty roadside grass and a frog in the water-weeds, and the hum of the smokers' voices below us, there fell on our ears the distant cracking of a post-boy's whip, with the familiar accompaniment of jingling harness. A minute more, and in the white moonlight we saw an open travelling-carriage coming rapidly towards us. There was a rush among the smokers to the front; the postillion worked up his whip into a state of frenzy as he neared his goal, and finally swung himself lightly to the ground, as he pulled up exactly under our window. The carriage was occupied by two persons—a gentleman and lady. The head of the *calèche* being thrown back, I could see the man's face very distinctly in the moonlight, which was as clear as day. I thought I recognised it: so, perhaps, did my companion, for she drew yet closer to me, and I felt her little hot hand tremble in mine. The doubt, if it was one, lasted but a minute: the lady threw back her veil; the small black-lace bonnet framed—it did not shroud—that carved ivory face on which the moonlight flooded. God forgive me! I had reason to know it too well; and so had she who stood beside me. My poor little darling nestled close to me like a frightened dove, and she pulled me quickly back under the shadow of the vine-leaves, as she murmured: "O, Valerian! that woman again! That woman *here!*"

"My darling, what are you afraid of? She can do

us no harm. Depend on it, she is not troubling her head about *me*."

"Why does she come here? O, Valerian, we were so happy!"

"Hush! Let us hear what they say."

"Bring out the *livre des étrangers*. We will see who has been passing this way." It was the gentleman who spoke.

"Just the romantic spot for a love-sick couple," laughed the lady; and her fine musical laugh fell on my ear like a discordant peal of bells. "I should not wonder if there was some one staying here."

We saw the greasy strangers' book handed to them by their courier, and the lady, by the light of the moon alone, turned over the pages and read the names written there. A dear little curly head was hidden on my breast, and a small voice whispered plaintively:

"You won't go down to her? You won't see her? Promise me. She'll try and take you from me, as she did before. I shall die if you go, Valerian!"

"Never fear, my darling. She bewitched me once; —I was mad then, I believe. But have I not something better now? While I hold my treasure here in my arms, what to me are all the fairest women in the world."

"Ah! you didn't think so once," she sobbed; "and I know nothing can resist her—nothing! Even now, you cannot take your eyes off her. Ah, Valerian, if she drags you away from me *this time*——"

I put my hand across her mouth, and listened with hungry eyes and ears.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried the lady, clasping her hands and laughing. "Look here!—what a *rencontre!*—read

this: '*Mons. Valerian, peintre, Paris, avec sa femme.*' Only think of *his* being here! I have not seen him since he threatened to blow out his brains."

"Poor devil! You treated him very badly, Cora. Who did he marry?"

"O some little English model, to whom he had been engaged for years—ever since she was a child. I wish her joy of him. Have you a mind to see them? Shall we stop the night here? You wanted a sketch of the lake; he shall make me half-a-dozen."

"That sort of fellow's a bore," said the gentleman, lighting his cigar. "Besides, you'll have to make the fellow believe you're in love with him again, in order to get your sketches; and it isn't worth it. How can you ever have found *anything* worth it? Gratified vanity, eh? You twisted him round your little finger, the young fool, all the time I was in Russia. Well, I hope you found it amusing. I always think society of that second-rate sort a nuisance."

"He was really very tolerable; the whole thing rather amused me, for a time—until he began to take it *au grand sérieux*. When he grew dull and taciturn, talked of nothing but death and despair, of course I was obliged to shut the door in his face. It would rather interest me to see him again, though," added the lady, carefully buttoning her glove. "Let us send for him."

And this was the woman for whom, one short year ago, I would have laid down my life—for whose sake I had cast aside the treasure which, undeserving as I was, I had found nestling in my heart once more! Blind fool that I had been! O, for those wasted, worse than wasted, hours! I felt, in that moment, how one

burning drop of shameful memory may embitter a whole cupful of present happiness. Else were there no justice under heaven; while faithful men, whose love has never swerved, are for ever severed, this side the grave, from all they have best loved on earth. Was it my darling's avenging angel who had brought this couple here to-night, that my ears might testify to the baseness of her who had seduced me from my heart's first allegiance?

This is what I heard the husband reply:

"*Ma chère*, it would be dull work for me watching you try to re-hook your fish. No doubt you would succeed—you always do. But I put it to you fairly—*est-ce que cela vaut la peine?* You, who have had emperors at your feet,—you may leave your poor artist in peace at last, eh, to the miserable enjoyment of his model wife. She punishes him enough for his infidelity before marriage, depend on it."

"No doubt; and I should like to have seen my friend henpecked," replied the lady with a smile. "It was just because he was so different from all the men of one's own set that I amused myself with him, *mon cher*, during your absence. I knew *you* would never have tolerated him in the house—as he never plays *écarté*; but as you were in Russia, it was rather an amusing change, after all the *blasts* men of the Jockey Club, to listen to this passionate sentimental painter, with his talk about Christian art, and his enthusiasm about the colour of one's hair and the turn of one's neck, and his utter absence of all conventionality. He was quite refreshing, I assure you, until he came to be a bore. By-the-bye, you never saw the picture he did

of me, in the dress I wore at the Princesse Mathilde's *bal costumé*? If we stayed here the night——"

Here the fresh horses were brought out; and in the imprecations which accompanied the tugging at the rope harness and the shoving of the beasts into their places at the pole, I lost the remainder of this sentence.

"If I have any luck, before we return to Paris I'll send to the fellow and buy his picture," said the husband; "but to-night, remember that Schwartzenheim is to meet us at Como."

"And *he* plays at *écarté*! I will get the miniature from Valerian, however, without your buying it, *mon ami*."

"You shall not have long to wait," I murmured; and disengaging myself from the arms of my darling, who followed me, pale and bathed in tears, I entered our little room, and ran to a case which stood near the bed. Among a number of other miniatures was one half-finished, which I had not looked at for months. I seized a sponge full of water, and passed it several times across the hard, beautiful, white face, that looked out at me less and less distinctly, until nothing but the faintest shadow of a face was left. Then I wrote with my pencil across it:

VALERIAN'S LAST GIFT.

I ran into the balcony. They were just starting. The *padrone*, surrounded by his satellites, stood cringing and congéing at the door: the postillion was already in his saddle, the courier climbing deftly into his rumble. I took my aim just as the whip went "crack!"

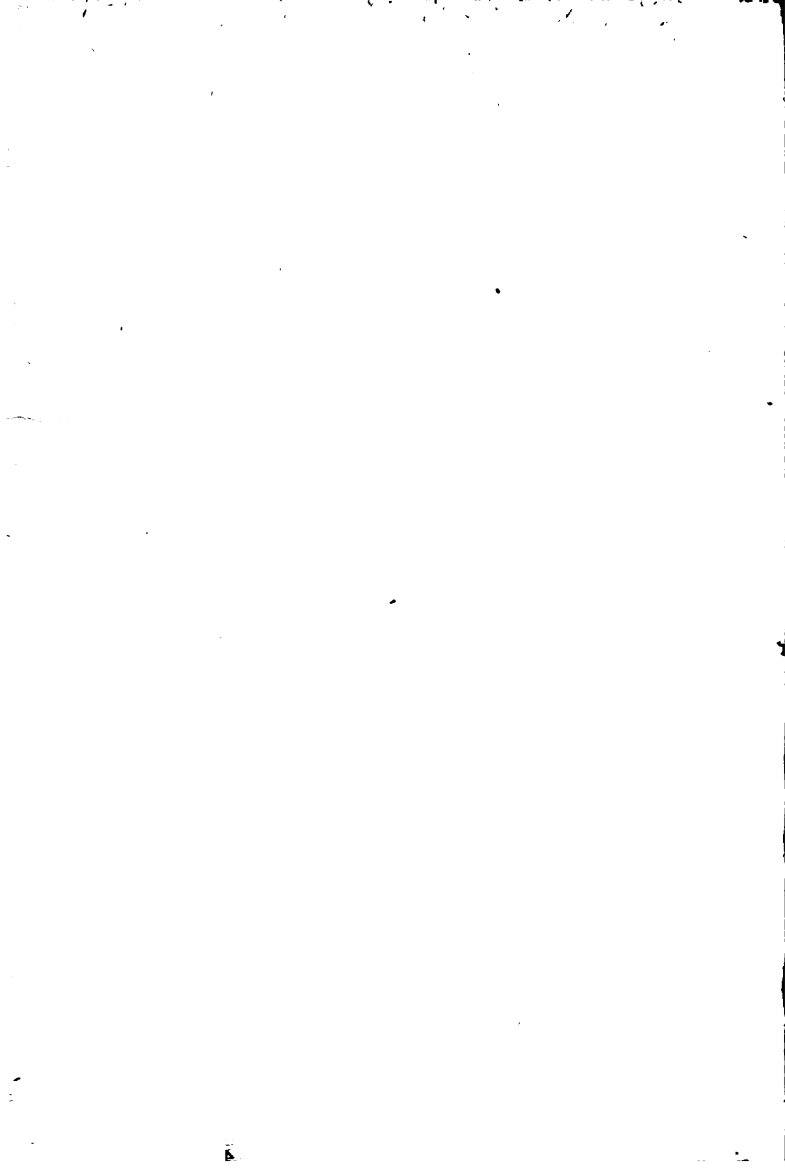
and the wheels, with a sudden jerk, began revolving: the bit of ivory dropped straight into her lap. She was startled, and looked quickly up. Our eyes met. I was leaning well over the balcony this time, with my arm around my angel's neck; and it was with no feigned fervour of passion that I pressed my lips to hers. The carriage was rolling out of sight in the moonlight and the dust, but I could just catch the scornful smile on that pale sculptured face, under its black-lace bonnet, before a turn of the road hid the woman from me—for ever.

Yes, for ever on this side the grave; for I learn that she is now dead. It was a painful lingering end; some internal torture eating away her life, and with it her dearly-cherished beauty. What comfort had she in those last hours, when her husband was playing *écarté* at his club, and her admirers had all deserted her, with no baby-fingers clasped about her neck, no children's voices to cheer the love-forgotten silence? Was the solitary woman haunted by the memory of lives she had ruined, of hearts she had burned up and laid desolate?

Why have I written down the story of those few moments in a balcony? Because I look back to them with thankfulness, as to the crisis when my eyes were fully opened. I know myself. I know that until then, blinded by the woman's beauty, I never really saw her as she was. But for this, there have been times haply when I might have regretted that my little angel lacked the Athenian grace and brilliancy that in another exercised so fatal a spell over me. As it is, I thank God for the helpmate He has given me; for her sweet trusting nature, for the heaven of her face, which always

brings me peace when I look into it. And when I see her baby curled like a rose-leaf on her bosom, and her two sturdy boys, who clean father's palette and mimic father's pictures in chalk upon the studio-wall,—ah, well, I say to myself, there is nothing the Schwarzenheim palace contains, nothing that poor dead woman's life ever compassed, that I would take in exchange for the joys my wife has given me!

THE TWO SISTERS OF COLOGNE.



THE TWO SISTERS OF COLOGNE.

MORE than forty years ago I was a poor art-student, journeying over Europe, with a knapsack on my back, having resolved to visit, if possible, every gallery worth a painter's study. I started with but a few shillings in my pocket; but I had colours and brushes, strength of limb, and determination of heart. It was my practice, on entering a town, to offer to paint a portrait, in exchange for so many days' bed and board; or, when I found no man's vanity to be thus played upon, I applied at all the likeliest shops, and I seldom failed of work. Thus I was enabled to carry out my scheme, while most of my fellow-students were vegetating where I had left them, with minds unenlarged by contact with the men and the arts of other countries. Though I left England with a heavy heart—for I was leaving behind me the hope and promise of my life—and though I was away on my walk through Europe more than two years, "in weariness" . . . and "in fastings often," yet I never envied the unambitious routine, the inglorious repose, of my less enterprising friends. I was constantly obliged to go without a dinner, when a turn of ill-luck (some temporary illness, or the artistic obtuseness of a whole city) had drained my purse very

low; but I seldom lost courage—courage and a confident hope in the future.

I was nearly in this plight, however, when I entered Cologne late one evening in September. I had been laid up at Dusseldorf for many days with low fever, and the belt in which I carried my thalers round my waist had been much lightened in consequence. My illness had left me weak; and I crawled into the town, dusty and footsore. Twilight was gathering around the many spires and towers, as I crossed the bridge of boats; a dark ruddy light alone remained in the calm river, where purple shadows were fast deepening into black; and the reflection of a candle here and there flickered in long scales of gold upon the water. It was very hot. I sat down on a stone outside the cathedral, too exhausted to go from pillar to post, bargaining for a bed, as was my wont. I pulled a crust and bunch of grapes from my wallet. Vespers were going forward, as I knew from seeing a few devout old women hobbling up the steps, and disappearing through the heavy leathern door. In no like spirit it occurred to me, after a while, to follow them. It would be pleasanter than outside: the soothing influence of music, the whiff of incense, the luxury of a straw-bottomed chair—these were the attractions, I fear, that drew me in. Heaven knows, I was properly punished, inasmuch as I can never again hear Cologne Cathedral named without a shudder.

There were but few persons present, and those were huddled together in one of the side-chapels, dimly lighted by the flare of half a dozen candles upon the altar, where a priest was officiating. The only other light throughout the great shadowy pile was

given forth by a feeble lamp or votive candle here and there, burning its little life away before the Mother of Seven Sorrows, or the presiding saint of some smaller betinselled shrine, and struggling out into the great sea of darkness fast gathering over all. The chairs were piled away in blocks, except a few, left for the use of the devout, near the altar. I preferred slinking into a confessional against the wall, where no ray of light penetrated. I laid my head upon my knapsack. I heard the priest's monotonous drone, the tinkle of the little bell, the low heavenly murmur of the organ, and then—I fell asleep.

Did I dream what follows? As I am telling you as simply and truthfully as I can all that I know of the matter, I begin by saying that I have never been able to satisfy myself entirely upon this point. Assuredly, the strangeness is no way lessened, but rather increased twofold, as the sequel will show, if one can believe that the strong and painful impression left upon my brain was produced while I was asleep.

I woke—that is to say, my own distinct impression is that I woke—just as the service was finished. In half an hour the cathedral would be silent and deserted; then it would be locked up for the night. If possible, why not pass the night here, instead of seeking and paying for a bed elsewhere? My legs felt mightily disinclined to carry me a yard further. At dawn, when the doors were opened, I should rise up, refreshed, to seek for work. But, even while I revolved these things in my mind, I saw a light coming down the aisle where I was—nearer and nearer. I slunk as far back as possible into the corner of the confessional, hoping to escape detection. But it was not to be.

The sacristan was upon his rounds, to see that there were no loiterers in the sacred building; his vigilant eye spied me. He laid a hand on my shoulder; he shook me—I must move off. With a heavy sigh I rose, and then, for the first time, perceived two young women standing behind the sacristan, their eyes fixed upon me. No doubt they were leaving the cathedral, and had stopped arrested at the sight of a young man being unearthed from a confessional.

It was impossible to mistake that they were sisters, though one was shorter and much less well-favoured than the other; but they had the same grey piercing eyes, fair skins, and hair which was something beyond flaxen—it was almost white. This hair was worn in a strange fashion, which I cannot describe, though I see it even now before me—the glittering spiral threads hanging partly down the back, and surmounted by some sort of black coif or conical head-gear. Their aspect, altogether, was very singular: I found that, so soon as my eye had fallen on them, I could not take it off; and, to say the truth, if I stared, the young women returned my stare with interest. As I moved wearily away, the elder one spoke:

“Have you no money to buy yourself a night’s lodging, young man?”

“I have enough for that, Fräulein,” I replied, colouring, “but I am almost too tired to go about and look for one. . . . I have been ill, and have walked some miles to-day.”

The sisters exchanged glances.

“If it be so, we will give you a supper and a night’s lodging. We need no payment. We are bound by a

vow to help any poor wayfarer so far. You may come with us, young man."

Something within me said, "Do not go." But why? What young fellow of twenty would refuse the hospitality of two handsome women, especially when he has but a few shillings in his pocket; is tired and hungry? Yet I hesitated.

"Accept it or decline it," said she, who was still the spokeswoman, somewhat impatiently. "We cannot wait here longer."

We were at the door as she said this.

"I will paint your pictures in the morning, then, in return for your hospitality," I replied, smiling. I was a vain boy, I am afraid, in those days. I had good teeth, and liked to show them. The younger sister, I saw, never took her eyes off me. There was no harm in appearing to the best advantage. I bowed rather directly to her as I spoke; and once more the sisters exchanged glances.

A hired carriage was waiting. Without a word, they stepped into it, and I followed them. The driver clearly knew where to drive. Without any order being given, we set off rapidly, but in what direction I did not think of observing. Like most German carriages, the glasses rattled over the stones, so that I could not hear myself speak. I made a futile effort, but neither sister attempted to respond. Both sat there, opposite me, motionless, leaning back in the two corners. I had nothing for it but to watch their faces in silence, and speculate about their history, as the lamps, swung across the narrow streets, threw lurid jets of light ever and anon upon those two white masks under the black pointed coifs.

It was not until we had been driving for upwards of twenty minutes, and had come out into what I suppose to have been a suburb of the city, judging from its high garden walls, that it suddenly flashed upon me that I had left my knapsack behind me in the confessional. An exclamation of annoyance escaped me.

"What is it?" said the younger sister, leaning forward; her voice was far more musical than her sister's.

I told her what troubled me.

"Did it contain anything of value?" asked the other.

I shook my head. "Nothing of value to any one but myself—a change of clothes, my colours and brushes, and a few books."

"The cathedral is locked now. It would be no use our returning. It will be open at six; and if you are there before that hour, you will find your property all safe, no doubt. . . . Here we are, Gretchen; have you the key? Open the door."

We stopped before a small, single-storied house, having a wall on either side of it, and no other habitation near. So much I saw, while Gretchen (the younger one) drew out a key and opened the house door. The carriage drove off. I followed the sisters into a narrow passage. Upon the right was the kitchen; on the left, the staircase; at the back, a door, leading, by a flight of steps, into a garden.

"Come with me, young man," said Gretchen. "Lori will get supper ready meanwhile."

The elder sister turned into the kitchen; Gretchen led the way up-stairs.

"We have but two rooms. . . . Lori will prepare your bed in the parlour, after supper. . . . Will you wash your hands?"

She struck a light, and opened a door to the left, at the top of the stairs. It was the bed-room of the two sisters—small, yet containing two beds, and several great chests. A black crucifix, too, I observed in the corner of the room.

"And you two live here, alone?" I asked. "No servant? Are you not afraid sometimes?"

She shook her head. "No, we are not afraid. Lori is afraid of nothing—not even of ghosts. Do you believe in ghosts?"

I laughed.

"Do not laugh," she whispered. "Ghosts are the only things I fear. Sometimes I fancy I see them in the garden there." She shuddered. "See what a fine garden we have. . . . Plenty of space, is there not?"

She was pouring water into a basin from an earthenware ewer, I remember, as she said this. She set the vessel down, and turned to the window, through which the moon, which was now rising behind a solitary sycamore, shone into the room.

A square space enclosed by high walls where the grass grew rank, and a moss-grown walk, led to a little door in the wall at the further end. This was what she was pleased to term the garden.

"The violets grow rarely there in the spring," she said, with a strange smile, as if interpreting my thought.

When I had washed my hands, Gretchen conducted me into the next room, where Lori had now laid the supper. It was a small chamber, with an alcove, or

closet, at one end, a great earthenware stove, and a number of gaudy prints around the walls. In the midst was the table, where three covers were laid. It was decked with a bunch of China asters in a jar, and was substantially furnished, I was glad to see, with a pie, a dish of raw ham, a loaf of black bread, and some grapes. As for drinkables, there was a small jug of Bavarian beer, and there was a bottle of water. Lori bustled to and fro; Gretchen lighted another candle, and set them both on the stove, behind the table. As she did so, my eye was attracted to the floor, on which the light streamed. It was uncarpeted; and a number of black-beetles were running across it, alarmed by the illumination, no doubt. Now, I have always had an irrational repugnance to this insect: I am afraid my face showed it.

"We cannot get rid of the nasty creatures," said Gretchen. "They come out in myriads from crevices near the stove; but the light always frightens them away."

We sat down. I was very hungry, and fell to with right good will. Lori kept me in company. She sat opposite; and whenever I raised my eyes, I saw the movement of her massive jaws defined against the candles behind her. Gretchen sat on my right hand; thus the light fell sideways on her face, while that of her sister was in shadow; and, the table being small, Gretchen's hand and mine came frequently in contact. She ate very little; she crumbled and played with a piece of bread, and seldom allowed those strange piercing eyes of hers to leave my face. As supper went on, Lori talked and laughed a good deal; Gretchen said nothing. She seemed to grow more and more

absorbed in her own thoughts; and once, when her hand touched mine, I observed that it shook. She filled up a tumbler of water and drank it. Lori pushed the beer towards me.

"Fill up for yourself——" I drained the jug into my glass. I raised it to my lip and began to drink. Suddenly Gretchen uttered a sharp cry, and started up. In doing so, she nearly upset the table; and her elbow somehow came in contact with the glass in my hand. Its contents were spilt on the floor.

"Ach! the beetle—the horrid thing!" she cried. "It has gone down my back, I believe!" She rushed from the room, as white as a sheet.

"Fool!" muttered Lori, setting her jaws tight. "What waste of good liquor! And there is no more in the house! I will send her, for her pains, to go and fetch another schoppen."

"Not on my account, I pray. I like water quite as well. Nay, your 'Bayerische bier' sometimes disagrees with me."

She looked up sharply into my face.

"Why, what manner of man are you, that drink water?" she demanded.

"I seldom afford myself anything else," I replied.

The beer had streamed from the table to the floor, where it had formed itself into a long diagonal channel towards the stove. It was still dripping, which drew my attention, I suppose, to the boards. The beer had encountered one or two black-beetles in its course. I had heard of their fondness for fermented liquors; it had taken effect very quickly in this case. I saw them struggle, feebly and more feebly, to crawl away from

the intoxicating flood. Lori's quick eye discerned what I was looking at.

"The nasty creatures! They soon make themselves tipsy," she said, as she ran and fetched a broom. Then she swept them up into a plate, and carefully wiped the floor.

Gretchen now returned to the room, and helped her sister to clear away the supper. As she moved about, I, my hunger being appeased, noted with a quickened perception what a supple grandly formed creature this Gretchen was. The fancy came into my head, that the White Cat, when transformed, must have resembled her; fair and lissom, with delicate pink nostrils and strange bright eyes. In the elder sister I thought the cat grew akin to the tigress; her sharp narrow teeth, heavy jaw, and stealthy cruel eyes, filled me more and more with an indefinable repulsion. I was glad when she said:

"I will go to see after your bed, young man. Gretchen will keep you company meanwhile."

I was sitting in the moonlight, near the window. Gretchen stood beside me.

"You are unlike all the men I have known," she said, after she had looked at me, in her strange way, for some minutes. "Are all Englishmen like you?"

"Happily for them I suppose, very few."

"But Englishmen are faithful," she said, eagerly, "They never deceive, never betray. I have read about one Englishman in a book. Could you be true to a woman, without changing, all your life?"

"I should hope so!" I cried, with the impetuosity of youth. "A man's love is not worth much otherwise."

She stretched forth her long white hands and laid them on my shoulders.

"Will you be my love, young Englishman?" she murmured, in a hoarse tremulous voice. "I can make you rich. You need toil no more. I can save you from great dangers too. I like your face."

I started up, blushing, for the thing came upon me suddenly, after all; but I replied, without hesitation:

"Were I to say I could love you, Fräulein, I should be false. I have left behind me, in England, one whom I have long loved, and to whom my word is pledged. I——"

"Listen," she interrupted, vehemently, but in a whisper, as though dreading to be overheard. "I have more in my power than you know of. Do not reject the love I offer; it may be the worse for you if you do. I would save you, young man."

I understood her to refer to my poverty and her own wealth, as I replied, with a little flourish of gallantry:

"If my love for another makes me proof against your charms, Fräulein, I am not likely to yield to the temptation of riches. Poverty and I are well acquainted already. Its dangers and hardships cannot scare me, for I have experienced them all."

"There are some dangers you have not experienced. A comely young fellow may run risks sometimes that he knows not of."

There was a wild look in her eyes as she spoke, and her words left a vague uncomfortable impression on me. But Lori entered the room at this moment, carrying my bedding in her arms; and further con-

versation with Gretchen was impossible. She helped her sister to spread the bed upon a trestle in the corner of the room; then she fetched sheets and a patchwork counterpane, the design of which I can distinctly recall even now. There were triangular bits of red cloth inserted here and there, which looked to me like so many small tongues of fire,—I have good reason to remember them.

When her task was done, Lori stood before me, with her arms akimbo.

"You feel sleepy, young man, no doubt, after your long day. We keep early hours, for we are up betimes. You shall have a cup of coffee and a slice of black bread at five, before we bid you Godspeed. Nay, no excuses. It is in our vow. *Schlafen Sie wohl.*"

Had I spoken the truth, I should have said that, far from being sleepy, I had never felt more wide awake than I did then. Ever since supper a strange restlessness of mind had taken the place of the languor which had oppressed me. Gretchen made as if she would have spoken when Lori ceased. She turned towards me. I saw her fingers working nervously at the black apron. I believe it was her sister's silent ascendancy over her which restrained her, for I intercepted a sideways glance from Lori's stealthy eyes which she shot towards Gretchen. With a face in which fierceness and terror and anguish seemed to be conflicting, the latter looked at me, as she followed her sister from the room, without even wishing me the customary "good-night."

What did it mean? Now, for the first time, I think, I began revolving in my mind all that I had seen and

heard since I entered that house, and a disagreeable sense of something strange and mysterious gradually took possession of me. What was there about these sisters to inspire mistrust? With the elder, indeed, I could understand it. There was a physical repulsion which made the blood curdle in my veins when I thought of her. But the younger was beautiful to look upon. She had shown herself tenderly inclined towards me. Why should I find myself thinking of her, with a feeling akin to dread? Her words recurred to me. At what danger had she hinted? There had been something wild about her eyes, about her talk, at times. Then there was her extraordinary proposal. Was she mad? I remembered her strange conduct at supper, the fierce authoritative look wherewith her sister had overawed her. It seemed a likely solution to much that was otherwise inexplicable about them both. But if so, how unaccountable that Lori, knowing her sister to be subject to fits and fancies like these, should offer hospitality to a stranger! There was nothing immodest about the demeanour of either of them; there was nothing that could suggest the suspicion that this was a guet-à-pens of any sort. The idea of robbery was ridiculous. Was not my poverty, so apparent in the threadbare student's blouse I wore, a sufficient safeguard? Why, I had not even my knapsack with me, as they knew; and I was young and muscular—not an easy victim for open violence, had any been intended.

I racked my brain with endeavours to arrive at some definite conclusion, for as to trying to sleep, I found it useless. My brain seemed on fire by this time. Every moment I felt myself growing more excited,

more keenly alive to every sound, and all my mental perceptions quickened. The single candle they had left me burned dim; it seemed to fill the room with all sorts of grim shapes and shadows. After a long interval, during which everything in the little house was absolutely still, I got up, in my restlessness, feeling that anything was better than to lie tossing there, a prey to feverish fancies. I walked about the room, with the candle, examining every article in it. First, there were the coloured prints upon the walls—among others, one of the Loreley, I remember, and one, a scene from Schiller's Robbers, which made my blood run cold as I looked at it. There was a cupboard, which I opened; nothing but a few plates and one old knife. I sat down again upon the bed, and my eye was attracted once more to the red tongues of the patchwork quilt. It was a very ingenious piece of work. I tried to follow the kaleidoscope pattern into which the various shreds had been wrought with that strange device of crimson cloth at regular intervals. Regular? No. At one place in the corner, I perceived now that three or four tongues seemed to have been sewn together. I held down the candle to examine them, and started back. What I had taken for crimson cloth, was a stain of coagulated blood.

I shuddered. "Perhaps some one cut his finger here," I said; but I didn't believe my own words; and then I tried to laugh at myself, and said my brain was giving way. I started up. I saw nothing clearly. The Robbers and Loreley were dancing hobgoblin dances on the wall. The moonlight through the sycamore branches played in a shivering shadow on one spot on the floor. I knelt down, and crept along upon my

hands and knees, examining the boards. But there was no stain there; only the smell of the beer in one place, and an army of those horrible beetles, who ran away from the light as I lowered it, to the back of the stove. I pursued them with a sudden savage impetus towards destruction. They all disappeared between two chinks in the floor. I set my foot on the boards. I thought one moved. I stooped, and saw at once that the two boards immediately behind the stove, though fitting closely, were not nailed down—might be removed, no doubt, with some little trouble. I dug my nails into the chinks and tried to lift one. In vain. I only tore my finger with a splinter. Then I bethought me of the old knife I had seen in the cupboard. With its help, I presently raised the end of one of the boards, and so drew it out. A square deal box lay concealed beneath. It had no lock or fastening of any kind.

Although my excitement was so strong, that I remember my two hands trembling as they laid hold of the lid, yet I paused for a moment before raising it. Was it a dishonourable action? My conscience told me I was justified, and I tore the box open. I nearly dropped the candle as my eyes beheld the contents.

First, there was a great bundle of coarse black hair; then one of curly flaxen, like a child's; then another of very long and silky brown—a woman's, evidently. Along with these, were four—six—eight—rows of *teeth*, some large and strong, some fine and white. A common ring or two, a silver watch-chain, a poor cloth cap, filled the remaining space in the box.

The horrible truth flashed upon me. I had been brought here, not to be robbed of my poor clothes, nor of what little coin I might have about me. These were only *to be thrown into the bargain*. They were seeking to compass my life, as they had done the lives of others, for the sake of such possessions as these before me—possessions independent of poverty or wealth! I remembered the tales that had been rife in my own country, not long before that time, touching Burke and Hare. And I now remembered, too, the look that Lori had given her sister, when, in my idiotic vanity, I had smiled and showed my teeth.

Now, I knew what was the danger to which Gretchen, in a sudden compunction and softening of heart towards me, had referred. Now, I could see clearly whither every incident of the evening-tended. The beer at supper was drugged with some strong narcotic. Gretchen had tried to save me. Had she really done so? I had tasted the drink; and though I never felt wider awake in my life than I did at this moment when the sweat started out upon my brow, in the consciousness that my life might not be worth an hour's purchase, might not the effect of the drug be only weakened and retarded for awhile? The small quantity I had imbibed had excited my brain into an abnormal condition for the time. I had little doubt of this. Might it not be succeeded by a reaction? I was seized with a horrible dread of succumbing, sooner or later, to sleep. I should then be powerless. I cared for nothing, comparatively, if I could only keep awake. I started up. It was dangerous to sit still. I traversed the room with hasty strides. I tried to turn the handle of the door; it did not yield; it was locked on the

outside. There could be no longer a doubt of the design against me.

The many church clocks through the old city struck two. I listened for any movement in the house, and once I fancied I heard some one breathing outside my door. But I waited a long time, and it was followed by no other sound. Then I began to drag the bed, the table, and the chairs, and to pile them up into a barricade against the door. This occupied some little time, and, work as quietly as I might, the necessary noise prevented my hearing anything else. It was not until my task was done that I became conscious of something moving in the garden, just below my window. There was a dull low thud, as of some hard substance striking the earth at regular intervals. I crept to the window and looked out into the moonlight, which was now fast disappearing behind a gabled roof. Instead of illuminating the entire plot of ground, the faint rays now fell slantwise into the garden, of which more than one-half was swallowed in black shadow. But I clearly distinguished two figures. Do you remember Millais' *Vale of Rest*? When I saw that picture, years afterwards, I could not help shuddering. It recalled so vividly the attitude of the two sisters as I beheld them in that terrible moment. The women were digging a grave; the elder one with all her masculine energy; the younger, reluctantly, as it seemed, removing, with slow strokes of the spade, the black earth, and pausing long between each. Once she looked up, and the moonlight fell upon her wan haggard face. She put back the long silver-lighted hair from her brow; she leaned upon her spade; and

then a whisper, like a serpent's, in her ear, urged her to her task again.

Should I fall asleep now, I was a dead man. I knew it. No strength, no agility, could save me. The dread of this became so acute, that it worked upon my imagination. I began to think I felt drowsy. A numbness seemed creeping over my limbs. A weight was falling gradually on my stiffened eyelids. I prayed, in an agony of terror, that I might not be killed asleep—that I might, at least, have a fight for my life.

Suddenly Lori raised her head and listened. The sound to which she had listened—a whistle, so low that I could scarcely hear it—was repeated. She crept stealthily across the garden, and raised the latch of the postern, which evidently did not open from the outside. A man came in, a burly thickset fellow, and the door was closed again. The three stood together for a moment in the moonlight. Lori and the man looked up at my window (I took care they should not see me), while Gretchen turned her head away and wrung her hands. Then all three came slowly and noiselessly towards the house.

Now or never was my moment for escape! There was one chance for me. I had seen how the door opened . . . if I could manage to reach it! But if I hesitated, a few minutes hence the drugged beer might complete its work, and I be unable to move hand or foot. I opened the window softly, and looked out. There was a drop of about twenty feet into the garden (which, it must be remembered was some feet below the kitchen again). If I jumped this, the noise must attract attention, and I might sprain or break my

leg into the bargain. An expedient occurred to me. I had not replaced the flooring which I had removed. The board, which ran the full length of the room, measured nearly sixteen feet. Leaning as far as I could stretch, out of window, I managed to rest one end of this board upon the ground, the other against the house wall some four or five feet below me.

I had scarcely accomplished this, when I heard the sound of feet outside my door, a bolt withdrawn, the handle turned. My barricade would obstruct the doorway for some few minutes: but for some few minutes only. I had just time to swing myself from the window-sill by my hands, to get both feet round the plank, to slide to the ground, to fly like the wind, to raise the postern latch, when the crash of falling table and chairs reached my ears. I ran—I know not in which direction—up one street, and down another, on, on, fancying I heard the sound of feet behind me; no soul visible, to right or left. At last, breathless and exhausted, down by the river's side, I came to a soldiers' guard-house. A sentry was at the door; there was the ruddy light of the men's pipes and of a lantern within. No haven was ever more grateful to shipwrecked mariner. I fell down upon the step; the sergeant and his men came and stared, demanded with oaths what I wanted, and, as I could not speak at first, declared I was drunk. Then, as in half-inarticulate phrase I poured out my strange tale, they changed their minds, and declared I was mad. But as I was an amusing rather than a dangerous lunatic, and served to beguile the tedious hours of the night, they let me remain among them; asked the same stupid questions over and over again; laughed their horse laughs; and spat, and spat all round

me, until day-break. Then they directed me to the cathedral, and I left them. One of the sacristans was unlocking the doors as I got there. I found my knapsack untouched, in the dusky corner of the confessional; there, utterly worn out, at last, with the excitement of that eventful night, I leaned back, in the grey morning light, and fell asleep.

The sun was high when I awoke; the feet of the devout were shuffling in to their morning orisons. I shouldered my knapsack and crept away. My head ached; my limbs felt chill and numb. Had I been dreaming? Were they no more than mere shadows of the brain, which had left behind them so deep and terrible an impression? I met a sacristan—not the one whom I remembered the night before—as I was going out. I stopped to question him. Did he know anything of two fair-haired women who had been at vespers last evening? I described them. He stared at me, and shook his head. In the crowds who came there daily, how could he tell whom I meant? I left him, and entered a humble little Gasthaus hard by, where, for a few groschen, I broke my fast. Here I made the same inquiries. I even essayed to tell my story; but I saw that, like the soldiers, the people thought me wandering in my wits. They told me, rather derisively, that I had better tell my story to the police. But how could I hope to be believed, unsupported as my extraordinary statement was, by any proof whatsoever? If I could not test the reality of these events to my own absolute satisfaction, was it likely that others would regard them as anything but the creations of an excited imagination? I wandered for a couple of hours through the city, trying to find my way to the house,

the exterior of which I felt certain I should recognise. I could not even trace the road I had taken, and, at last, I gave it up. The conviction slowly and reluctantly grew up in me that I was suffering from the effects of a vivid nightmare. Its impression remained painfully strong on my mind for many days (I left Cologne the same afternoon); and, indeed, for some weeks, I never fell asleep without a dread of living over again those terrible hours. But "no ill dreams disturbed my rest;" and since the effect of all things must wear out in time, as months rolled on the memory of my night in Cologne became to me no more than a remarkable experience of the strange phantasmagoria which the mind may conjure up, and invest with every appearance of reality, when volition is removed. I drew over and over again, in my sketch-book, the heads of those two sisters, as they had appeared to me; and I wrote down, with extreme particularity, every word they had said, and every small circumstance of my dream.

One winter's evening in the following year I again passed through Cologne, on my road home. I was a richer man now than I had been eighteen months ago; my foot was on the first rung of the ladder, for I had painted a picture which had sold well. It was no longer necessary for me to carry about my worldly possessions on my back, or to seek out the poorest Gasthaus. The steamer landed me, with other passengers, on the quay, hard by a handsome hotel. I resolved to patronise it. The evening was cold; but all along the quay, outside the hotel, in the courtyard, groups of people were standing, and talking with a slow heavy power of speech, betokening that the

native mind was moved by some topic of more than common interest. I caught a word here and there which roused my curiosity. I asked the Kellner who showed me to my little room what the subject of such general public interest was? An execution, he replied; adding that executions were rare events there, now, and that unusual interest had been excited by this one, from the fact that the persons who had suffered the extreme penalty of the law were *two sisters, murderesses*, whose crimes had long escaped undetected.

I must have turned white instantly, for the man looked at me with some surprise.

"Did you ever see these women?" I managed at last to stammer out.

"No, mein Herr. I could not leave the hotel, to attend either the trial or execution. But there is an officer in the Speise-saal who can tell you everything about them, for he saw them in prison, and commanded the troops in the Platz to-day."

I said no more to the man, but went down to the coffee-room, a few minutes later, with my sketch-book in my hand. At one of the small round tables a middle-aged Prussian officer was having his supper. Without more ado, I accosted him.

"Sir, you will forgive a stranger's intrusion, I hope. I am an Englishman just arrived in Cologne. I understand that you were present, in an official capacity this day, at the execution of two women. You will oblige me greatly by giving me what information you can respecting them. The motive that prompts me to ask this favour is something beyond common curiosity, as you shall presently learn."

"Be seated, sir," said the officer, politely, pointing

to the chair opposite. "I will tell you all I know concerning the sisters Strauss. You are acquainted with the nature of the crime of which they were convicted? It was the murder of one Hausmann, a young pedlar. Not for the sake of his money, for he was poor enough, but for his hair and teeth." (I shuddered, but said nothing. He continued:) "This was by no means their first crime. They were discovered to have been driving their horrible trade for two or three years past. It is supposed that they murdered upwards of twenty persons, men, women, and children. Numbers who disappeared mysteriously are now said to have been made away with by the sisters Strauss. Their victims were all strangers or friendless, to whom they offered hospitality, and touching whose disappearance no inquiries were likely to be made. Some few had money, perhaps; the generality were poor; but several watches and a considerable sum of money were found secreted in the house."

"It had a garden," I said, as though I saw it all again—"a garden walled round, with a postern at the further end. In the house were three rooms."

"Just so. All the world has been visiting that house during the last few days. A great number of skeletons have been found in the garden. The popular execration was so great that it was feared the women would be torn in pieces on their way to the "Galgen" (gallows) to-day. Had it not been for the strong guard which I commanded, and that their terrible sentence—one rarely pronounced now—would, it was known, be carried out to the very letter, they would assuredly have fallen a prey to the fury of the mob. As it was,

the savage satisfaction at the prospect of seeing them broken on the wheel——”

“Broken on the wheel! Good Heaven, sir, you surely don’t mean that this sentence *was* carried out?”

“Yes. It is, as I have said, very unusual, now, for this punishment to be even recorded, still less enforced. But in cases of very rare atrocity, nothing short of it seems to satisfy the public.* I saw even women, to-day, looking on unmoved; though I, a soldier, who have seen a good many bloody battle-fields in the great war, would fain have ridden away when I heard the first crush of the elder sister’s arms. It was horrible to hear—and then her cries! You know how it is done? The head is held down by two men, by a rope tied round the neck. The limbs are then broken, one after another, from above, by a heavy wheel. At the end, the head is severed from the body by a sword. The elder sister’s agony was prolonged to the very end. I suspect the executioners were more merciful to the younger sister. It is known that they sometimes contrive to strangle the culprit while holding the head down. The younger, after the first sharp cry, never uttered another. She had ceased to suffer, I hope and believe, long before she was beheaded.”

Some minutes elapsed before I could speak. I opened my sketch-book, and turned over its pages.

“Sir,” I said at last, “I have one question more to ask you. Do these heads at all resemble the wretched women whose death you this day witnessed?”

“Assuredly they do. They must have been drawn from life,” he replied.

* The wheel was absolutely abolished in Prussia about thirty years ago.

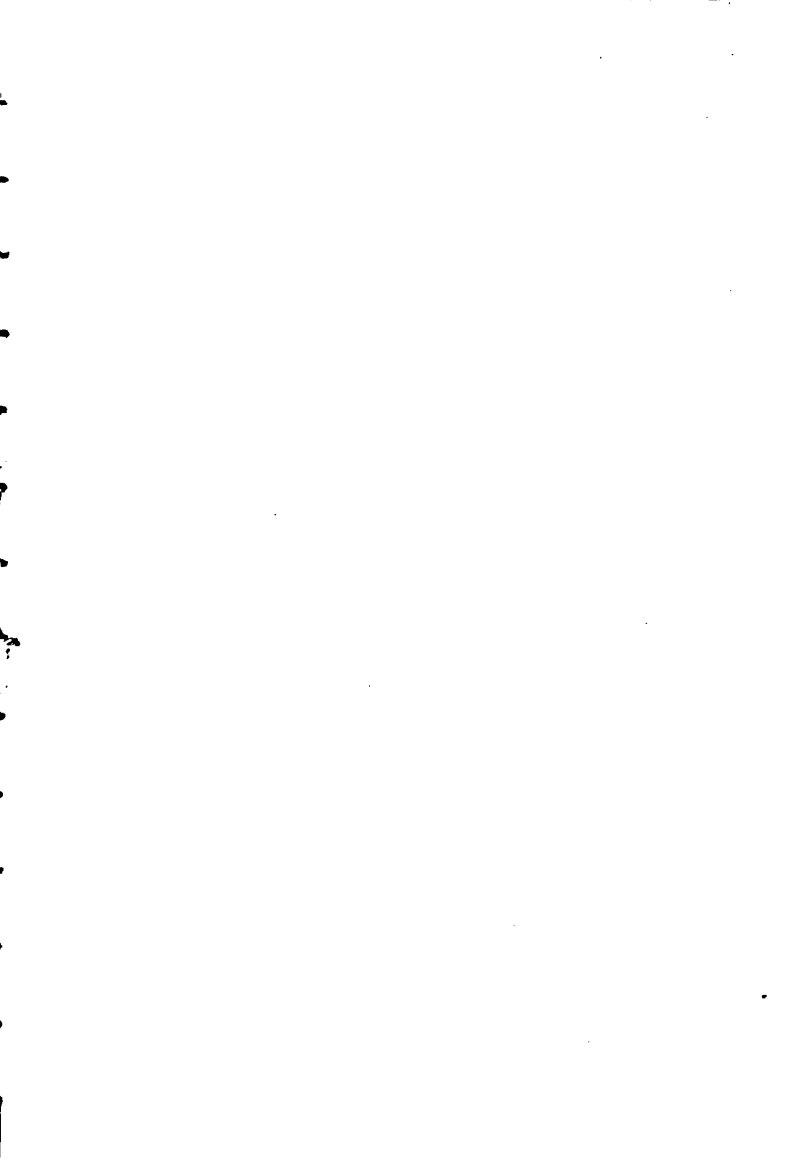
I then told him my story, as I have now told it you. I need hardly say he did not doubt but that I had actually, in the flesh encountered the sisters Strauss, and had been in such imminent peril as very few men have survived. As to the hypothesis of a dream, which had taken such firm root in my mind that I could not lightly discard it, the officer laughed it to scorn.

Yet even at this distance of time, when I read and hear strange stories of second-sight, of prophetic dreams, and warning visions, a doubt crosses my mind, and I ask myself whether my adventure with the two sisters of Cologne was not, perhaps, of the nature of these? But you now know as much as I do, and I leave you to decide the point for yourself.

THE END.



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